Sulfur 12

A Literary Tri-Quarterly of the Whole Art

FEATURING: A NIGHT WITH HAMLET BY VLADIMIR HOLAN

THE COLLECTED POEMS OF CHARLES OLSON 1950-1957

JACKSON MAC LOW'S PIECES O' SIX

PHOTOGRAPHY BY LINDA CONNOR

A REVIEW OF ROBERT DUNCAN'S GROUNDWORK

AN INTERVIEW WITH ROMAN JAKOBSON

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Sulfur 12

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Vladimir Holan

from A NIGHT WITH HAMLET

Tr. from the Czech
by Clayton Eshleman and
Frantisek Galan

Menippus:
I see only bones and fleshless skulls,
and most of them look alike.

Hermes:
That's the very thing that has astonished all the poets, those bones...
And only you, it seems, are contemptuous of them.

Menippus:
Well then, show me Helen, for I wouldn't recognize her.

Hermes:
This skull, that's Helen...

—LUCIAN

When passing from nature to being
walls are not exactly benevolent,
walls pissed on by the talented, walls spat on
by eunuchs revolting against the spirit, walls no smaller,
even if they're still unborn,
yet walls rounding out the fruit...

The yielding ripeness of Shakespeare
invites license. Its content,
which like astonishment should be
sanctification, becomes, as time declines

(with possible indications of its absence),
a usurious tax on all apartments,
into which a theater director has arrogantly moved.
Only fraud is a certainty here. And the spectator,
who has prematurely crept up like a Saint George dragon,
warms himself in the bile of the critics...
And those who dare to map even desire
have it easy, though they too are
a coleric testimony to irredeemable jackasses...
But nature is always a sign
which, if it doesn't keep silent,
denies itself. After all, the male,
that opener, feels mutely only because
the spirit always moves forward
and everything closes behind it...

He too was like that... Hamlet!
His arm torn off, evening rolled through
the empty sleeve of his coat
as through a blind man's genitals, chewed up by the music...

Nature joined our contempt for the city
to the rocky urine of upturned mosses
at the entire golden height of capability
and waited until the wine caterpillar became a butterfly,
but to no avail,
because he felt contempt for wine from the day
when out of thirst he had to open a horse's artery
and drink the blood...
That led him to accept a jinn
and to exclude seemingly unrevealed mysteries,
and, being between himself and himself,
he spoke for the abyss.
After that, he only spoke out of it,
even when, say, he discussed a certain saint
who had nothing left, except her pain
from remembering an ancient lover,
a pain so small, she could easily hide it
inside a rotten tooth...

It matters little
whether the saliva hissed at us

dripping from the mouths of sleeping crickets,
constructors of midnight bridges,
the created creating, who built two tombs
out of apparitions, taking a wage for prophecies.
Only art was without excuses...
And life too insisted,
but insisted with the risk that we'll survive,
though we might also wish to die...

There was no repose... Nowhere, even in the unconscious...
But he was here, Hamlet, who like a Mozart-lush
overturned the Alps, to place a bottle insecurely
on the creaking step of the fear of death,
he so close to himself that between him
all immortality could fit...
And indeed, in his presence
the knife under the sheep
could not slash anything
and the melted pewter from old baptismal fonts
would congeal into vital shape.
Yet, anxiety exists. He was on the wound of eternity
and had to heal it. He was in father's tomb
and had to be a son of children... He was
with the holy soul of music
and had to be, for the earnings of a harlot
or for the price of a dog...

Oh, not that he knew everything, for he strongly sensed
that when selfishness stuffs itself,
it does not throw up, it digests and starts again—
not that he was wise, like a wood pillar
tends to be among those of stone—
not that he trembled with disgust
on an ancient floor painted by the bloodflow of women—
not that out of avarice he recalled final things
and would therefore live in Atreus's tomb,
in which treasury led directly into mortuary—
not that it mattered to him
if Alexander the Great's crooked nose
straightened out something in history—
no, no, but I still see his scowl
at people for whom if anything is a mastery

it is also an emptiness, into which
they hurl all their emasculated fury...

Whoever gives remains avaricious...
And yet we do not believe and are always waiting for something,
and possibly people are always waiting
for something only because they do not believe... They are enlightened,
but they don't radiate... They are anemic,
as if, without bloodshed, there would be nothing,
they are cast out but still not excommunicated,
they are curious and yet they still haven't found the mirror
in which Helen-Helen
looked from below-below,
in fact, they are so deaf they'd like to hear
Jesus Christ's voice on an LP...

And yet everything, everything here
is miraculous only once:
only once the blood of Abel
which was to wipe out all war,
only once the unrepeatable unconsciousness of childhood,
only once youth and only once song,
only once love and simultaneously to be lost,
only once everything against heredity and habit,
only once the untying of agreed-upon knots and hence liberation,
and only once the essence of art,
only once everything against jail,
unless God himself wanted, on this earth,
to build a house...

Over the wall the greenery arched
and cast, along the way, the hawthorne of its curiosity.
The window opened the wind, which drafted through:
    All your action is a lot and is nothing,
    yet action filled with being: a miracle to be envied!
The night smoked history, ate the fried winglets
cut from Mercury's ankles
and washed it down
with the sweat of the organist at Saint Tragedy's...

"Only when you reconcile yourself to death," said Hamlet,
"will you understand that everything under the sun is truly new...
Our body is not a canvas hangar,
whose fabric you can clip things out of...
But our subconscious plays games... Even if we unstintingly
give alms, it's for our benefit!
Ditto for copulation by mistake... But no!
The fumbling genitals of interrelations can do nothing more in people
than be in them without them... However,
the liver of lovemaking lies in sin.
So even the tension of bodily profanation
will recall to you the penalty of the spirit...
We don't feel good around sleeping people either,
because we don't know where they will stop,
while we are stuck here...
If a man considers how heavy a cat suddenly becomes
when it is dead, while somebody
can spend a whole day shooting sparrows!...
But yes, there is man shame and woman shame.
A man cannot even bear to see a cotton pad.
And a woman? Hardly born when it is dry,
she's already flattering the downpour..."

After a while, Hamlet added: "For children an answer is never
enough...
They play, for instance, with a cupboard of secrets
and in the end carry off its key to themselves.
Or they are ailing and secretly open the letters
of an imprisoned poet who in jail
paid for a special room by the fact that they themselves opened the
letter...
Or they are ailing and see in dreams a pillar of fire
and cry: it's a rod, God's vein!
Or they are ailing and can't shake from their minds
the unending handwork of women
which may have wanted to warm only them
or to weave a man in, or to plug itself up...
Or they're healthy! It's a precious moment
when it seems that the sliced bread belongs to no one...
They they'll walk out of the barn, say, and unwittingly trample
the last kernel from last year's harvest
so that right away they might be somehow even more tempted

to place the gold wig of a hay stack on a skull of fire.
They are as full of life as a horse,
who feels the rider not as another being,
but as his own thought... Rejoicing, shouting,
they've been together for a year and don't regret it,
they have a potent antidote for anything that's not a miracle—
all stains are only mud stains
on new clothes and can soon be removed...
Children! They've found the true names, now they just need to be
pronounced!"

I interrupted, saying
that he looked like a millstone quarry.
Have a drink, Hamlet, I say! Do you want it with
the oven, the mind of the farm,
or with the passion of the blood's cardinal points?
But he wasn't offended, and said: "Pö-pa!"
What? say I, and he replied:
"That's what the Tibetans call themselves!"
and went on: "Virgins, oh yes,
they know when a tree is ailing!... But I have met convicts.
It is enough to imagine that some of them have
huge rumps so immense only because
the constantly rushing memory of the same crime
forces them into a legless squatting,
unless they became swollen by frequent whippings
for they smell of tar...

'The streetcar didn't come!' says the woman. And the man
answered: 'It's worse when a ship is late,
that is, you who like a ship
leave within you under you an uninterrupted line...'
Yes... Whereas virgins, yes,
they know when a tree is ailing... And the encircling male grafts
always take place through the canvas of their innocence,
even if they already go about in stockings of harlots' body hair...

Freedom, you know, is always kin
to *voluntary* poverty..."

Night overlapped night... Inclining toward earth
or becoming a headstone to everything,
what the living and the dead were doing at the time...
Maybe the living were timid and insolent...
And the dead were not intentionally but hereditarily
or revengefully envious...
I understood when Hamlet, not suspecting my thoughts,
said: "What now only surrounds us *one day will bury us*...
Once I was at a fire...
the innumerable flame made me notice
a single knuckle of the whole hand of the present director of
the fisheries,
enough for me to have to think of the bony carving
of nothing upon nothing...
The hair of a hanged man
is even more sensitive, because *fluffy* on the spine,
and it is no more to being
than body hair to knowledge.
But still more spacious for the shivering quinine of Elsinore
was the sound of the clipped nails on Ophelia's feet...
You know..."

No, I don't know, I said... but right now
I'm expecting guests! I added, annoyed
by my conviction that he loves his unhappiness...

But once again he was not offended and went on;
"Querer la propria desdicha... But what
makes a mother quiver
would shatter galleons at sea...
Besides... If there is no God,
no angels, and if after death there's nothing left,
why don't those admirers of nothingness
honor precisely those beings, not being them?
I felt that once
while hunting white falcons... It also rises
out of Chinese tombs... And the tablets of Moses
speak of nothing else... But from an inverted humility
or a pride still unclear,
because, only now stitching up the bellows,
we'd rather kiss a greyhound between the eyes and a horse on
the hoof,
and when we enter the library we are not afraid...

While hunting white falcons I felt a rhythm,
before the tablets of Moses a movement,
before Chinese tombs a rhythmic harmony,
before the Ainus, I felt near, far, light and heavy gods...
Anyway, that is the moment
when you are still expecting guests
and they're already here, for they've come earlier...
Yes, to see each other and to be able to talk
and to feel intimate warmth,
and a heartbeat as true as Rembrandt's needle,
when nevertheless each of us is different
(for *that* is what souls do)
and not to catch the serpent with another's hand—

A jet engine is not for a poet...
And as a tree remains a tree and still produces fruit
that ripens prematurely
fruit on time and fruit only later:
no, one cannot rush in words
for we were not and are not
from the peoples' right of torture
longing to be man for man!
Efficient love, you know?... Dailiness is miraculous...

The greater the poem, the greater the poet,
and never vice-versa!" he added, then continued;
"And you are a great poet if you ask with whom to be damned...
Art as a work of art so you don't grow proud...
I tell you art is a lament,
something for someone, nothing for all,
for simply by hoping you are in the future...
Something always extends beyond us because love too
is only part of our certainty... Atonal harmony...
And pain as punishment for the fact
that pain too is fleeting...
Or is it perhaps that human help
which could be a help
uses God's help as an excuse?
I don't know, but through the *shape* of some people I realized
the proportional content of the octopus..."

(*to be continued in* Sulfur #13)

Leland Hickman

Two Poems from TIRESIAS

ANNOTATION FOR THAT WHICH FOLLOWS

Terror outcast young girl trembling auburn soft pageboy fear blown
tears, scream;
tiresian purloin san juan de la cruz cruise text cross out
graphemes for
god outhouse captivity cry let me out cry poisoned defeated
brutal, lewd;
despumate desquamate perineal bubo mary janes slap
sharp upon
pavement his dislocalized speech immobilized arm her
elbow skin
withered nervously recounting it ladder to which de
lusional com
parison "wrongd every rung of" bad catch
me bad hurt

me bad hate me mama at

orisonned out
set immiserizations mandala his
mandatory sen
tencings fiery in child dreamt burnt flesh bloodtaste cess
pool out
fall, writ, chalkt up in a shit shed shoeheel bang bars keep
death row a
wake mandala aflame uncharred vermilion-haired satanhead in't whose
blond eye

lasht boyhood bloodied boymate fled, sobbing under obscure care here in
tensive care
here arroyos aflood in downcaster plain in purgative night in
ebriate ca
rotid catheter celebrant rectal esophagal capillary-rain brainsbust in out
burst
verse here; panning gold death valley; she grammardays 19two3 spring so
lazily over
comix page age 7 quite contrary mary mary late on yr way to school a
lone a lone
ly man's candies small movies stop pitchblack in secret by se
cret ladder dis
guised "brought groceries in stood wide-eyed staring at
nothing saw
right off the bat he couldn't move speak braced him from
falling got him
into a chair called the" planets stars sun progeny of
thunder cross
out thunder dim out kitchen railroad free
way din in
grasp struck blank still
'd space in
haled commere lemme showya a chokehold bud
dy pale lasht
trust on summerstreet; whose lyric breeze whose parted locks
what wounding sus
pends tender text in oblivion howsomever begrudgings denials for
given sick
nightwatcht breathings gone limp slippt grasp fallen knockt-out for
real his
monkeymug kisst asphalt come-to ahowling, hands to his broke face stum
bling home
but a stiffneckt brutish boy gets led by a god down planks in a mudwrackt
yard gets
turd-housed gets
lockt in in dank to unlearn in shiver in crumple in whimper let me out
in out let me
out cloyed anguishes sweetrots his candies halt our schoolgirl in terri
fied husht

mary jane shoes thin kneesox frail pinafore tremulous instanter to
flee she
screams eludes him kickt demonic out of her womb by his crude grum god
who smasht his
sucking bottle in his mama's face blent splendor for his first gaze blood
milk stream
ing noxious child vengeances boxed unto horros hys
terical cack
ling thru peckerwood flats san quentin sordors death
row night
long longings to be gone to be scattered
in isolate

sierra in the strong somber trees

or wrencht in squal
id sleeps guided by a cross-eyed bald de
mented bitch
past sabretootht text toward stone deaf stone
eyed stone
tongued weavers of inflictions drencht under stone
aged river of
avidya scared little girl breathless to be safe near an oak
tree by storm
fenced schoolyard whenas oak hides terror with his hideous smile his
idiot out
stretcht arms panickt she runs screaming runs years reclines no tender
text maker his
face in his maker's chest kisst where he slumbers dusk at his window

screen un

veils thick-scabbed visage forehead to chin seept pus glistens no hand a
sleep ca
resses his neck no harsht sentencings suspended metastasis liver to
lungs no
amorous breeze aroused among cedars; luger-rounds steept long in
godhead of
stray cats strangled set fire to drowned, trusst dogs airgunned im
paled on a
mopstick godhead of a thousand times stabbed prime pig vic
torious man
slaughter laughter teen-aged caged kangaroo gang raped
twice shank

slasht wrists pubescent laughter after last rippt-off mus
tang never to

hang for a yellow-gut

godhead in
scriptures bullets in an infant's laughter bad catch
me bad hurt
me bad hate me mama "man I sure did blast that dumb punk's
brains all
over the trees"—gentle abandoned childish text, silvery wet,
outstrung in
awe struck leaves—

HE WHO DELIGHTS IN SIGNS

tilphussa = from which spring Tiresias must
drink & so die

tilphussa without to drink thee
both tilphussa within

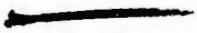
as when suckt about poet into poem's
more ruin in flame my deathmost

tilphussa of his goddess's juices
as of her serpent's tongue in my ears a
tiresian upwelling voracious not yet gone luminous down on honest as
early as
sign as down on a
child's rift, rift of her portions fresh in
face eyes throat seeping arroyos make shift at,
threshold, as he who delights in signs as ascend from my glistening
madre, thru my well of her startlings, tilphussa,
in downcaster plain, at alphabet close, in cringing, in hiding
as in goddesskin of his herness her godskin who am

angerly glad flung, mad by infected
feastings, starkt as to dread, dasht to last
wishes, cobwebby viral word blood temblor this
stumbler in naked elision, enjambments stunned, at alarm's
distance, syllabled hell in a panic deathwell toxic bittersweet sleep of who
drink thee

signs, blinded in me as my astonied daughter
born dimmed as my manto, gorgeously wounded
infant her gaze in-where on nowhere, scried sign severely,
as of her tendermost plaintext retting.
some god's doing.
one of my grim
kind.

(blue sun breath door
at tilphussa spring
to drink so to die of, sexual of
ice gust bone clean vastation deathathenamymadre her potion.



Mark Karlins

FIVE POEMS

At Matlock cave
if you sever your hand

& place it under
the dripping mineral water

it will not decay
it will petrify
it will turn

semi-translucent stone

the self likewise of such material unless

THE VILLAGE

That the narrow alley of the self expand
like the dark oil of a river sunk into the earth,
the muscularity of the intellect

passes down into the sleep.
The body dreams its own resurrection.
The flower grows in the stillness of the dark.
The stars of the soul spread out like trees.

The river power

Rabie,
woman with moon riding her stood
on the thick roots of a tree,
a note like that from a flute
in its branches

& those friends, powerful as swimmers,
rotating around each other,
exchanging, coming to take from us
our dead

And the roots she stood on sinking slowly
like the veins of a river,
each swelling in lust
& its murmuring spreading far
as the outskirts of the village
where her parents who had driven her out
burrowed softly
beneath the quietness of the sheets.

Rabie sank with the sinking roots.
Try as she would she could not get out.
She sank deeper & cried for help
& the villagers,
though pulled by regret,
refused to go to her;
refused to invert the order of things

not one of us, they said,
night-shadowed bodies
planted like the heaviness of trees,
shoulder comforted near shoulder.

no undoing,
impossible, they said,
not right to interfere

& yet they finally went,
bewildered, all of them
to move almost without transition
toward her no abiding place

& they tried, the large mass of the village,
to dig Rabie out

but the more they struggled
the deeper she sank;
& they made a chain of people,
men & women,
hand linked to ankle,

a huge turning spiral,
& were carried with her
like the long root of a plant
seeking nourishment
in the stillness beneath the earth

THREAD

When love was a spider & out of her spinnret
the down-pouring sexual
liquids
hanging

silk of fate the heart

like music everywhere by its inner structure

joined

the soul & all her voices

PIANIST IN SEARCH OF A BLUE NOTE

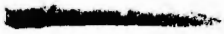
At the temple of Minerva
Goethe posed in blue light
had the suspicion
he was on the track of the typical,
that this temple was governed
by the exact same laws
that governed the growth of minerals,
that in the complex organism he inhabited
the smallest outermost leaves of a sapling in the Black Forest
were precisely analogous
to the structural laws of Shakespeare's *Histories.*
Some seventy-five years later in the stifling heat
of his home-made back-room laboratory
Jung pricked the finger of the reasonable
a large bosomed woman who sat stiff in a wasp-waist of anger.
She was a large & self-sufficient woman
but it made her sigh
to look thru Jung's microscope,
the blood-drop spreading out like tiny flames.
The sight slit open a saturday evening concert.
Discipline had hollowed-out the keyboard,
had stunned into elegance
a frail-boned hump-backed pianist
who just under the notes
improvised blue shadow.
There was a harmonic series
she was piecing with her skin
but she needed to thaw classical
to breeding ground, jazz to
a pianist thrusting tendrils thru Bach's paved intentions.
Loosen up, Jung said,
improvise a sparrow with soiled hands,
circumambulate a Buddha in D flat.
Let us imagine, he continued,
that if I were to examine the numerous layers of your civilization
& then penetrate to bone
in the marrow I would be able to trace the outline

of a child's bone, so would I also be able
to trace the outline of music
present at your birth.
There are no dead objects
or at the worst what seems dead
gives leverage, an enormous
beetling crag of rock,
to an embryo preserved in adult,
the receding testimony
of a niche-set blue lamp
pulsating in the dark
of inexhaustible cellar.

In the center of the labyrinth
there is always an animal,
dark blue horned self

not yet come to consciousness
not killed but taken-on & carried back
thru congealed male-will of corridor,
an animal attached in embrace & deepened

that we no longer hate whom we love



Yves Klein
The Leap, 1960
"The Painter of Space Throws Himself into the Void."
Photo: Shunk and Kender

Marjorie Welish

THE SPECTER OF ART HYPE AND THE GHOST OF YVES KLEIN

Although he was not particularly gifted in the conventional artistic sense, Yves Klein (1928-1962) was nevertheless a conjurer of painting and theater—someone who was as preposterous as he was ready to seize upon the esthetic issues of his age. The son of French painters, one of whom was a practicing Abstract Expressionist, Klein grew up in a milieu that took for granted the shamanism avowed by the artist deeply intent on creative "action." Though by the early 1950s, irony on both sides of the Atlantic was commonplace, and artists as different as Ad Reinhardt and Robert Rauschenberg sharply doubted painting's metaphysical content and heroic stances, Klein remained convinced of these matters. And yet one could not be sure. In any event, Klein's flamboyant, intense practice made a strong impression on artists in the United States. Having seen his canvases thickly flocked with ultramarine pigment, and having read about his orchestration of paint-drenched nudes performing as "living brushes," American artists were quick to exploit Klein's literal transcriptions of heroic gestures. Minimalists responsed to the tactile and retinal physicality of his painting; practitioners of Fluxus, Happenings and street theater variously elaborated his sense of performance; and Pop artists gained from Klein's insight that photography and media at once copy and dissemble the appearance of the natural world. In 1982-83 a retrospective of Klein's output toured the United States (Rice Museum, Houston; Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago; and Guggenheim Museum, New York) before closing in Paris. Recently seen at the Whitney Museum was BLAM! The Explosion of Pop, Minimalism and Performance 1958-1964, *a show with conspicuous traces of Klein's influence. The following article scrutinizes one work by this French Force for Change in American art.*

On January 12, 1960, painter and performance artist Yves Klein leapt from a second-story ledge to the residential Parisian street below. Hurtling himself through space, risking life and limb, was a singular event. The photograph of the event was as dramatic as a front-page tabloid—shocking the art public into noticing the bizarre French Neo-Dadists. Since that time the photograph has been scrutinized by some in the art world almost as closely as the Kennedy assassination snapshots for evidence of authenticity; for, in fact, the photo had been published in two versions, one showing the urban environment altered to remove a passing train and cyclist.

Fifteen years later, art historian Nan Rosenthal exhaustively researched the entire episode. She concluded that Kelin did indeed take that jump, but over tarpaulins held under him for safety; that several rehearsals of the leap were needed to shape the perfect trajectory; and that in the darkroom photographers created a montage of the leap and a background purged of traffic, eliminating the mundanity that interfered with Klein's notion of the pristine void. Over the years, Klein leaping, seemingly oblivious to his own suicide, has remained particularly tantalizing, and critics have continued to speculate on the meaning of it. It seems safe to say speculation will continue no matter what the evidence: biographical data will not undo the perfection of this teasing image, which insists on its own authenticity even as it confounds authenticity on every level.

Ethical authenticity haunts the esthetic discussion of Yves Klein's recorded leap. An image so startling, so instantly compelling, and yet so implausible, the photo of the leap challenges us to authenticate its actual origins in a way that may start with a detective story concerning technique but ends with our pursuit of the elusive issues of the integrity of self-discovery and authenticity as a mode of being. Today, in the 1980s, appropriation of personae and roles has become standard post-modernist practice. Whether in painting (David Salle), photography (Cindy Sherman), or performance (Eleanor Antin), mimicking cultural role models has superseded the struggle for individual integrity that prevailed as the ideal forty years ago when Yves Klein came of age. Then, in the 1940s, the ethics of authenticity inspired artists with its special meaning. Abstract Expressionists fell under the spell of this peculiarly existential notion, whereby the artist, acting from an inner agonistic urgency, strives to fulfill the unique potential of himself and his art. "Authenticity and individuality have to be earned, "says Sartre's rephrasing of Heidegger. "I shall be my own authenticity only if, under the influence of the call of conscience, I launch out towards death, as towards my own particular possiblity. At this moment, I reveal myself to myself in authenticity, and

I raise others along with myself towards the authentic."

On one hand, Klein's *Leap into the Void* may well be the perfect visual illustration of authenticity, for it palpably demonstrates the sincerity of a man, no longer content with merely espousing an attitude, actually assimilating the notion of his own death. On the other hand, since taking the existential trope literally is not proof of authenticity, but a mechanical translation or a comedic reduction of meaning by which a vaudevillian enacts direct engagement with the world, the leap is sheer acting. It is this latter possibility that suggests insincerity or, if not insincerity, naivity and a simpleton's literal world view, but in either case, a false enactment of the striving for self-fulfillment so valued by the Abstract Expressionists who were Klein's contemporaries. Whether or not Klein knew the Sartrean metaphor of the existential leap directly, or indirectly, absorbing it as common knowledge, the image he produced replicates its meaning exactly, but erroneously. If the possibility of faked evidence is unnerving, Klein's literal-minded interpretation of authenticity is most disturbing because it suggests not merely toying with ontological integrity but fundamentally misconstruing it. Nevertheless, his misreading of Sartre's intention did not prevent Klein from expending much sincere energy insisting to friends his flight was real.

To judge by the process of how the image of the leap came into being—how Klein rehearsed the act in an extended shoot before a camera until satisfied with the execution and how the resulting images were manipulated in the darkroom—it is clear the artist contrived this spontaneous act at the expense of spontaneity. Moreover, it is not the leap but the photographed image of the leap that at once captures and doles out breathless ecstasy. "*The Leap into the Void,*" the catalogue listing reads, "a conceptual event principally embodied in a photograph by Harry Shunk. . . ." Thus spontaneity was pre-planned, and Shunk's collaborative artistry helped fabricate the image through photographs edited for the purpose of selecting the most tantalizing moment in the leap's trajectory.

Photography, then, was not so much a witness as a subtle co-conspirator in forging the leap of authenticity. Like photographs of environmental earthworks, too remote for direct viewing, documentary photos and films of performances communicate art by proxy, and in many instances, this secondary source material has come to supersede the reality of the event itself. By the time Klein master-minded his photograph, the problematic nature of documentary material had become an especially savory literary topic. It had prompted Robbe-Grillet to argue in both his essays and novels that the photo's "information" describes only the

exterior of events whose underlying reality lies inaccessible to the viewer obsessively trying to reconstruct the definitive reality of what must have been. It would lead Antonioni, in *Blow-Up,* that cinematic souvenir of the 1960s, to show that the more rapid disintegration of a witnessed event through successive photographic enlargements, the greater the speculation about the nature of the event's reality—the more so because we assume a photograph to be objective.

The Leap into the Void, as subjective as it is ambiguous, eludes absolute interpretation. What after all, is the meaning of a work which first seems to be an action of an attitude, then a photographed image of this enacted attitude? What is the meaning of a photo that exists in two versions and in two different contexts, one, an exhibition catalogue, the other, a self-published tabloid? Evidently, for Klein, performing the leap for photographers was only the beginning of his staged authenticity. On November 27, 1960, Klein published *Dimanche (Sunday: the Newspaper of a Single Day)* filling it with avid photojournalism written by himself about his monochromatic paintings, his fire fountain, and of course his leap—the latter, complete with a photo and the headline, "A Man in Space!" and extravagantly captioned, "The painter of space throws himself into the void!"

While it is certainly possible to construe the tabloid as rabid, self-promoting hype, Klein's personal aggrandizement is not the entire message the image itself sends out. Rather the newspaper seems to offer an extension of the role-playing required to dramatize the leap. Lionel Trilling, who discusses the sincerity of role-playing in his book *Sincerity and Authenticity,* reminds us that acting is not necessarily inauthentic, but an outward sign of an inward vitality; the Greeks enacted the roles of ideal beings as if they themselves embodied these ideals. Perhaps, then, Klein's tabloid is an expansive form of the intimate immensity Klein is conscious of as he plays his role, the role of the ideal artist, existentially construed. Flying hair, wildly manic eyes, arced body—all in perfect consonance with the metaphysical leap—Klein's abandon is only further launched by the newspaper's promotion of it.

Nevertheless, beyond this—or should one say, co-extensive with it—is Klein's skepticism of his own act. Blanketing the newspaper with sensational copy that mimicks yellow journalism, Klein's exposé undercuts his performance. It is this flamboyant self-betrayal that Rosenthal has in mind when she proposes Klein to be pursuing an art of "conspicuous fraudulence"; so irrepressible is his hype, she says, that anyone who desires can see through his disguises. If the photo of the leap conceals some evidence of its fabrication, Klein's one-issue vanity press loudly confesses it.

At some point, one comes to the realization that whatever metaphysical values Klein holds, his practice demonstrates he believes fraudulence or authenticity is irrelevant when dealing with art. Once again, as in the photo of the leap, a case can be made that Klein is only taking advantage of the deception inherent in all perception of visual illusion. Accustomed to painted illusion, we fall into the trap of believing in photographic illusion, and then are offended when we are fooled. Our cultural expectations of photographic truthfulness have not prepared us to be skeptical when viewing a human in danger; but artists have always indulged their prerogative for legerdemain. Within this is the idea of Magritte's pipe: one can well imagine Klein's tabloid displaying the photo of the leap, with a bold caption, "This is not a leap!" performing Magritte's paradox for us once again.

Nor is the specialized notion of existential authenticity immune from artistic manipulation. But our expectations suggest otherwise. It is certainly understandable how, on seeing *The Leap into the Void,* viewers can be misled into expecting Klein's full commitment to the existential value to be first and last an ethical—not esthetic—choice, and then judge the art inauthentic on realizing that Klein's commitment is to artifice. If the disparity between the ethics of authenticity and the sleight-of-hand that brought its image into being distresses those invested in existentialism as a guide to life, Klein remains unperturbed by the problem; authenticity or not, for him artifice only enhances art's intrinsically magical properties.

Ultimately, one is tempted to pronounce the *Leap into the Void* more sophisticated than the man who produced it. Larry Rivers, who knew Klein in Paris, says, "Klein had a great desire to convince people of his beliefs, especially his belief that anything can be art—walking to get a newspaper, feeling the wind in your hair..., but to call him naive," Rivers says, "is to disparage the vitality of his practice." And his sincerity. "There was very little irony in Klein," Rivers says.

Then again, Nan Rosenthal reaches the opposite conclusion. Too many works demonstrate knowledge of Duchamp, she contends, for Klein to be perceived as innocent. But if Klein's artistic sophistication seems destined to remain debatable, uncertainty is forever guaranteed by the speculative nature of esthetics, which like ethics or metaphysics cannot be proved, only asserted. Perhaps on some level Klein intuited that, as a speculative cultural value, authenticity is predicated on belief; his ironic artistic colleagues certainly realized that once cultural values shift and disbelief sets in, the art so recently brave with authenticity now seems devoid of it.

If not Klein, then Klein's photo contrives a transparent image whose meaning is nonetheless scrambled at every level. It is also a perfect icon of the age, that moment when, as Trilling says, art as well as morality was in the process of revising itself. For in the transition between Abstract Expressionism and the reactions to it through Pop and performance art emerging in the 1950s, the authenticity of "action painting" caught a glimpse of its own image: "candid" photographs of Jackson Pollock did as much to create the attitude of authenticity as the paintings themselves. When in 1949 Yves Klein saw *Life*'s photo essay on Pollock, he was riveted by it. With such awareness of the self-consciousness of performance, authenticity would become simply another ingredient collaged into the esthetic mix.

Jean McGarry

WATER BABIES

A Little Novel

DREAM DATE

To start with (on this hot summer day), the desirable boy up the street is out on the sidewalk in a set of clean laundry, while yourself—well, perhaps you'll stay out of it this time, stay home where you belong, rubbing the tape of the player piano between your lips to feel the bumps.

Or, he has a sailor hat on. You could put on yourself a sailor hat and like a sailor speed up to his house and speed back letting him see what you have that's like he has.

Mother is in the kitchen waiting, perhaps, for the fruits of these experiments and for further evidence of what you can do. She, too, sees through her window the clothespin standing on its prongs and the small hat up there at the Conneally's. She also notes the white of his house, the blue of his sky and the kind of element that those Conneallys have always seemed to live in and up to you to open a tiny door between and let a little of it come down here, let her fill her fat lungs, she of whom the word fat wouldn't begin to describe, even by comparison with you, the sense to someone like him.

At what point you, the old mathematician, ask yourself, could you plot from here: the domain, to there, the white, the blue, the youth: the

range? Can you be sure of leaving here, going there, getting him, coming back, in this universe of laws and materials dominated by laws, answer me, in an ellipse or a simple straight line doubled back? Would he be on your back? Could you start anywhere in the house and arrive, or can it be missed by a few degrees here and so much larger at the other end, fanning out—the brown dot—into the water right up to your maggot's neck, or back to the city on the other side, and him still standing there in his beautiful drapes and seaside frame.

How said I am for your prospects and the sadness of your mother's prospects.

RHIZOME

A fine salad was spread onto four plates. Eat these salads. Have you felt the kind of refreshment in the upper palate as the cold green slides and rotates? All is uniform and going toward unity in the inner part of the body. Twist your lovely body in your seat, a solid you are with vials of imperfect liquid: by imperfect, I always mean something in between.

A body has nested in my mind's nest. It will lay a root there. You will favor it and sit there dangling your feet.

In the body, in the mind: these are not the same chamber. A mother has the baby inside the body; the body has the mind and the mind, the baby and the baby's mind.

A salad is formed of gold and green curls, a round red nut and silvery fork resting on four or five stacked enamel plates: black. A picture in a magazine on my legs and in the picture a salad and a salad plate; a turkey on the back of the page just over the thighs.

Is this the kind of food you like? Have you decided about your own food and is it the food on this page: salad on a stack of plates, four forks, twin tomatoes, cluster and aggregate? I will always like what you like if you like this or something else I can picture. A green food is a first choice and the way a fork can pierce it and lay it plain on a quiet tongue. Eat all this and eat more. Paper your beautiful cave with these green towels and green curtains. I would visit there and bring whatever was needed. I would retrace my steps and make a small house anywhere with a view to these green walls. I will eat anything you eat, or picture.

BATH

A bath was half-filled. Dear Dad flexed his toes over the bath and made a wave. Round and round, Dad, round. He curled his toe and made the adjacent toe cover the toe and that gave a pleasure which countervailed against the sense of soft water creeping up the medicine cabinet mirror. It trickled on his cheeks too.

Sometimes, time is water and Dad felt the bathtub rim push his buttock to the bone and the bone pushed, too, and causing something like pain, but also like pleasure.

No matter what you say, what you can't say is Dad was not secure although he was on a limited perch above water and full of consideration for water and the water climate of the bathroom, and the window on the bathroom scale spoiled by water. Where was he in all this? Another way to put this is where did he stand? Where would you stand if you were here for Dad?

Answer: Dad stood or sat on the rim of the bathtub with a fresh toe circling a circle in the limpid pool of white-colored water, waiting.

Was he—if you were here, you might ask—waiting for mother? If you asked this question, you would presume, Thales, that all is water, that all is warm and white-colored and the dangling toe with the softest of all elements: mother.

Was he waiting for mother? If you ask this, Dad will sing and sweat and watery sweat will drop onto his tongue, so glad and wedded to water he'll be, and you.

Was he waiting for mother?

But now, you cynics, the water is cold. The warm water is cold or colder than it was, colder than the thing called toe, and Dad, if he's your Dad, pulls it out, the toe, and shakes a drop on the pink rabbity rug and holds the toe aloft, inspecting the changes due to water: spongy skin with ruffles, the inlaid toenail. A time in water, perhaps a time for water and now it runs out, runs down the round drain, circling or spiraling the way it does and making the noise. Pale toe, cold body, immutable bathtub. Water is now gone and Dad folds his toe, puts his toe away for another time. Goodnight, mother. Goodnight to you who make all the days like water.

I awoke to spots on the pillow and my mouth conversing itself into a rind. This is how it started: the nights.

The first night was kind and a shepherd drove a small flock over the soft bump of the hill. Your arm purpled with threads of veins and a bruise and the pigeons nestled on the ledge as nice. You—when I say "you" I'm talking about the antique, something with a red gloss on it and a mirror over it. I have never put a mark on the marble floor and "you" to me is an articulation or an extended period of history, not as long as night, night being its own flexible and flexing thing and you having the character of a partial scratch on a paper, and yet beautiful the way the unfinished is.

I could lay night, you down like a pencil and half eaten apple and reach for something—some part of a conversation which "my" teeth whispered into that small warm cave. Where would that take the night and a night's rain?

The character of rain: pervious, impervious, its long straight lines and the humor you'll find in the oval puddle fixing itself in a hollow on the blacktop. Gain and loss.

Gain: does the night gain, and in what? The formal turning of one filled hour to the next. Do the hours curve around expectation, and what is expectation but curve, a sinuosity which so subtly imitates the shape of the body: cup and flex, mold and unmold, young and older hollow.

To leave this in an open key and move or modulate to another night, another attempt to grind the flesh to a purer, segmented pigment and no formal unity of whole, ball and hollow.

Night: so much happens "in" it but how to get inside it so compactly as not to drive a notch or finger through its supple sheath and when I say that, I mean memory, whose thin walls admit of all sound, but hold so little, the cheap attractions of its cube and so cheap in its cube, for so it sometimes forms when put to rest.

The second night (I say two, but mean nothing but past and further past), the shepherd slipped himself and fat muttons over the sad hill again, just the same, always the same if you make it the same and I always do, if I think to do it and if you ask me to do it, for I can always bring it back from the dead, for nothing is dead but just overlooked or overelaborated, to be no longer recognized as the simple thing it was once, or remembered. So, the first thing occurred and room now for a second thing.

A room: why is it that space is always available? Twice as available as time and more attractive, whispering to the thoughts and not-yet-present pictures. A picture in a space, an invitation to a space, by the space to the picture and instead I put myself in it, imagining how flat I could be if given a space just flat enough and no more. How I could thin there with night and all available apples, the sound of feet and wool.

Tomorrow is another night and that night to fill. You fill a night first with edges of things: part of a buckle, unraveled thread and a necklace clasp. A necklace is nice to lace around a neck or night and soon, always soon, the frame opens to admit it. Later a flatness falls out, a mosaic of ends of things and this is something we've always—we, us—thought and passed it to each other as land, story, imitation, love and accepted it from each other with a surplus thank you, or not.

Night end. It ends only to begin filling again and wrapping its filled woolen sleeve around the shoulders and just at the waist. To end it, momentarily, you drive white tablets through the young parts of the mouth, and so red it is at dawn and dawn's lively perimeter and sink; the night sinks as the teeth wear their collar of flesh and morning.

WHERE WILL IT END, WHEN?

Where will it end, when? Is it for life to paint this beautiful smile? Who is it smiling at? The man across the street looking out the window in a black suit: undertaker, a man who addresses the dead ones as little men; he thinks of them as men, so do I, and I smile at them passing by just as nicely as I smile at you. Passing by in their cars with the rolled up windows and the flowers they (the little men) get when dead are not nice, are not well selected, have no delicacy, just empty lasciviousness which is what death has, and the little men all know that. It's funny that it ends so funny.

He takes it seriously, though, at the window, for a job is serious and you are as serious as you take your job, or as your job is taken. Job is not part of death and not even dying, which is work, is considered job. He has the job looking out the window; they don't have it, and the flowers might signify that.

It's a static moment, his looking out the window, the nice glass of

the window and the little men all quiet in their canoes. See his breath on the window. He doesn't see it; he's thinking of me and who am I to have the prerogative to look over there at him, neither dead nor job? My beautiful smile.

Girl: what is it? I want to think it isn't well connected to funeral flowers, or that the little men might admire me, as he does. My father had a black funeral suit. What is here for girls? I'm looking, he's looking, father is a little man, but his canoe is broken up and the flowers, those hard things, are so close to laughing. My smile—he can see it, but beautiful pain and smile is not death or flower and my job (not a real job) is to smile and be silent, stay inside my own house, do not try to interfere with all the jobs on the outside, the little men, canoes, flowers and when it ends, I'll do it.

WATER BABY

What is life but a length of work punctuated by sin, detour, a coil? Deliver me from life, O You.

How will the retreat be made but from life to light, light being nothing graspable, but still there in strings, in plates, in fiery matin curtains. Light is length, but more than length.

The sins to commit in life are formal, more and more abstract variations on the theme: sugar, suck, tear, to hurt and to have, to halve and to harm, to return to the beginning with an empty envelope and a token and to have one more turn, one time out, time to flatten, thin and fluctuate, to lie, steal and abrade, to hang, in short and in fine, like a thread over the river curl, to be a man or woman forever and drop like a spider on this thread, to spy on the things you missed.

Human hunger for representation of food, food but not food, the perfection of it in a picture all bedded in a code and cold to the touch. Human desire for the other coded on a bed of iceberg lettuce, young onions, blades and forms, flake and chip. If you made yourself (you) a picture, I'd cut it in half: two halves and roll it in my fingers to make the long spiny thread and with the thread, I'd perforate the top of my head and a product would emerge like a condensed drop, a water baby.

That's the kind of life I'd have: length, sin, coil and coiling into a dark bony region.

THE SOULS

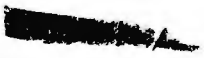
So I woke, the room was white, the bed was narrow and white, the souls were arrayed on the bookshelf, the lime soda was flat in the glass. Mother stepped in and inquired, the door cutting into the room and giving the room this sense of another room, as to the last few hours and the qualities of my sleep. We both gazed through the window onto the sky's own mindless blue—I say mindless, for where is the variation, mind being variation, or even a skipping from point to point by a fat and spotted toad with algal feet and a sense of desire, but for what?

We gaze at the blue. Mother then, then Mother brings the coffee cup, the large milk cup, the tray of cups, the biscuit and its cup and a cup completely free of entanglements. How the souls do bleat and cry for their milk.

By then, the intricate morning is gone, the white room is now the pourpre of the afternoon. I am lifted, I the child, for whom the day has unfolded with mother in the fold; see the leg dangling with dust of powder hanging from the baby hairs and glistening in what they call a bath of sun on baby, and the shift of souls from one foot to another en route in that long day of the motionless pacing of souls. Every room has its souls and mine and mother's are a collection of bottles with the souls inside and out, and some wound inside the caps.

Mother sails the afternoon and out the window, a sailing ship and a coil of rope. Has she left a baby behind? The glass of lime soda, whose light so full and material, is divided equally outside and inside. The day is walking, the souls squealing in their traps. The food of the day is gone or nearly gone. Have you seen a child lie in a gray or gray-blue pool of light, his hours—more a thing than a span—like chairs, a box or a cone. Lie there until lie means anything else.

Here she is shaking something with a spider in it; it is a baby formula with a small cross; it is a mother's unction and a bright silver nipple; no, it is five formal napkins and a charm. It is mother. How she sails in a bright robe, just as the day sailed to its weights and now, we'll wait till morning, a second morning, to repeat the things we love, over the intermittent sound of the souls and the late green soda, another window, and imitate flat face, the unbroken blue and baby.



Geoffrey Young

ELEGY

Clouds of fingerlings roiling in a blue tank,
and for movement here comes the man with the bucket.
Watch 'em hit! especially early in the present tense.
We'll be investigating the evidence of a less
coordinated raid before their snapping jaws close.
Perspective is what changes the pursuit; just by
giving up a little we become effective bright-mouthed
coastal omnivores, implanting something, shall we say,
pure in the mirror? We've all seen it. The face,
the big face, some god-awful big face belonging
to no one, round as a nickel. Our father's?
He is sad. You can't ask. He cries watching
"The Gambler, The Nun and The Radio" on TV. He
embarrasses you. His strange fuzziness at night,
light sliding across the surface of a blimp. And his
voices, even if we build on them, "Got a bit of it
on your chin there, didn't you?" or "This rock Hap's
got looks like the main exhibit" are more like sitting
ducks than signal fires lighting up the pond, when
in fact we pass into the great beyond on lightly tanned
rectilineal hips, reassured to think. More than that
you can't ask for via belief, or study this later.
To hold love in one hand, and vomit in the other
is to have the story well under way, the picture made
up of small accents, of waves stared at, of tiny prayers
the words are feeding, brush your lips on them, his broken
body. The idea that we are misfits, some deep-dish
western plastic anthology with all the meat and vegetable
markets in full swing, appeals to me, a process
we're stuck in, or haven't bothered to type yet.

And who am I talking for if it's no one's fault?
To say congratulations to the deadman who after 50 years
of active research finally achieved a world emptied
of the rules that kept this life so tangled up, is...
is to forget the...I don't know. He was important to me.
The light of history sputters now on his flannel
trousers, so neutral, we're not situated like we once
were, feet forward, forehead skin tight. What's stable
is the rate of bad news, the screws a little tighter
or altogether stripped, the teakettle whistling
over a Spanish language broadcast, "Yo siento mucho
Señora Lopez, y muchas gracias Rosalva." A vivid
primitive okay seethes in the literal heart, which is
to say, swallow, the logos broken down and distributed
into the typecase one letter at a time, one gust of
rain-whipped wind, drawer shuts, body gone, everyday life.
Click track, eyeline match. A normal BM, seniors, is
what is normal for you. It never hurts to flint the gap
between words and what they mean, as in, writing's the
best omelette ever made with a chainsaw. Diamonds are
born of other pressures. The horizon is our life sentence
kind of see-you-in-the-morning sailboatish if now
is now, the regatta the regatta, no one coming back,
dove sta memoria. The occupational hazard of making
a spectacle of myself can be worked out in little theatre
form. When the phone call voice said "Ballgame's over"
there was just a plate, a fork, a chair, an empty room.
Enough that he'd sent the word "chalumeau" as a way
to make sadness beautiful. For five minutes I turned
into a shapeless blob of body-heavy numbness. The total
event, any total event, any event is total, syncopates
the eye. But exactly how far away does aesthetic
distance have to be before it turns into a pile of dirt
next to a deep hole in the ground? I still don't know
how to piss in it, then howl, then laugh till I cry
only to remember his quirks. He raised me to think
women could become jockeys, toreros, privileged content.
But now some alleviation of the sense that I am closing in
on absolute zero catches me in the back of the head
bleakly and says, "Welcome other views on the subject."
Our letter A is an ox-head, our letter G a camel's neck,

etc. When you walk the street at this hour, certain
abuses of your expectations spangle the surface a square
mile at a time. The well-built little Egyptian barques
drift from the dock to test their tethers, though
they won't set sail without these words, while radios
from the upper deck blow gale force commerce and it's
a family legend carried to rest in slow dissolve,
along with a lot of infuriating phonecalls and comic
disclosures that yes, here was an artificial paradise
filled with household materials, disagreeable side-effects,
some old silver, a few lawn chairs half wood half aluminum,
and now a team of "experts" on the laid-back side of
responsible sorting through the carved coconuts, the
fiercely somnolent ashtrays, the abandoned microscope,
the jar of paintbrushes, minuscule rock gardens, and
well-thumbed bookmarks dropping like territorial flags
at *just* that place in the *Greek Reader.* Ithaka always
palpable and remote at the same time. Months earlier
he touched an old tooth and it fell out. Genes jump
along the chromosome, nothing is stable. No one knows
what life is, though the taped music plays. The mask
floats over the deepest impress. Tiny moths live
in the wreath of chili. True happiness requires
cubist scaffolding and considerable naivete. Sip
the drink you nip. Or turn to the street palms
stretched out over the highway, cement mixer, putty-putty,
waving to a half-wit in baggy pants whistling bird-like,
a long silent spin on the finger of a perfect stranger.
What about the calm just prior to visions? I have
no sudden idea for making one person speak another
person's English. I can't get my hand off the synthesizer
music, conscious of what an eyelash is, with an iron
egret rusting on a length of welding rod, an old straw
hat further crushed by each "interesting" conversation.
Throw the legless furniture out. A few dozen washable
tattoos make kids chatter. It's not snobbish to prefer
Donatello's David to the Marlboro Man. Unusual stress
and an urge for mayhem at either end of the light
spectrum shoot my curtains off. With tweezers I rip
the sun out of the sky and douse it in the toilet.
Psstt. It seems an obvious extension here to analyze

our various handwritings for traces of anomie, bouquets
of white wine, and *herbes simples,* even though I don't
like anything that time does *per se.* The meaning of
a houseboat, sky high, no pavement in front, conventional
harbor depth, music by The Normal, an old man a mirage?
in white shirt standing by the shore, his eyes crowd
upon us, welcome back, between black arrows of scribbles.
Agile, not artful. They pull your wisdom tooth, you
feel a little lighter, but wiser? Sodium pentathol:
a swan dive through liquid cement. So the last thing
in this life is to betray love, voice as a value of
presence, presence of the object ("O saltshaker of
perfection"), presence of meaning to consciousness,
self-presence in so-called living speech written in red
ink standing up at a bookstore. A college kid might look
up and say, "Slap my empty pockets," or "Stuff rugs
under lid of piano" with an innocence I am the percussion of.
Every time I try to relax, a hideous Bavarian orchestra
in lederhosen lit by streetlamps shining through leaves
sticks its warm brassy air in my face, but I'm not
repairing dreams anymore; the speed of all sound waves
is the same. Sitting on a towel watching the bath water
steam, this whole deal getting highly Chinese now,
the old man's tears, by force of example, become mine,
and I miss the judgment of a good man. I trot out
my top stories, I listen to the radio. A receiver gets
sent long, downfield where the organ that pumps the blood
pumps the words. The last photo quite beautiful, the
last shave. Last time that hand held a pen, last line.
Last sunlight, last elevator, last doctor, last walks
through house on paper thin bird's legs, turning blue, last
hallucinations, last deadness, last pain, last attempt
to find a poem in a book, Auden's "On Melville's Tomb"—
they'd said he was incoherent, I went straight to his
bedside and quoted its opening line "Toward the end
he sailed into an extraordinary mildness" and without
opening an eye he said, "Auden, in the front room by the
heater." The ear I'd whispered into a draining open wound.
Playing cards of afternoon light from the kitchen window
collated the boredom and mystery of dying into a uniform
I could wear with enough acceptance to attempt to discuss

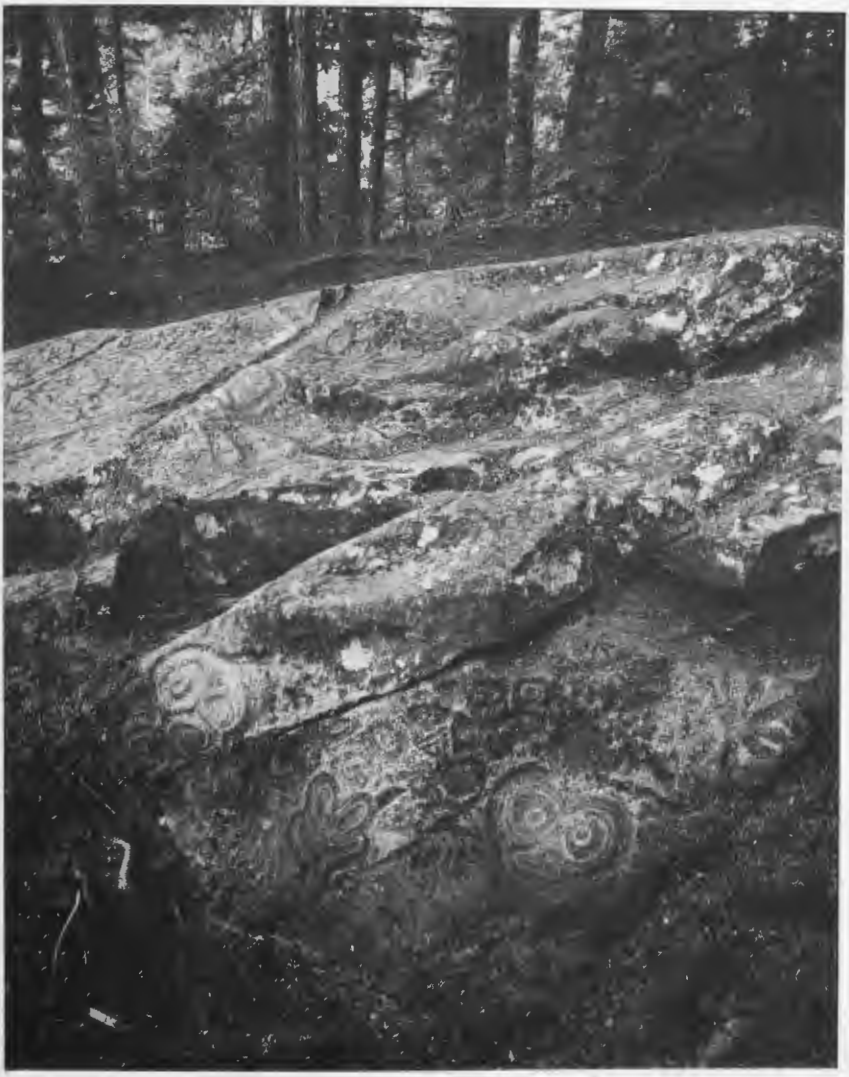
South American drinking habits with a parrot someone
had brought by to keep us company. Let me ask you something:
Have you walked out to the end of a pier lately? A glacier
all but covered the globe, his little country down about
2,000 feet and precarious. I wanted him to get it over
with, to stop doing calisthenics, to lace his skates
and go. I let the tide carry my fingertips over the barnacles.
A diet of morphine, shallow air, blind ravings. Later
I saw him in a dream, he was looking at himself in a mirror.
He moved closer and closer to his image, then kissed himself
on the lips. To sit in judgment of the way he walked
into the kitchen to put icecubes in his oldfashions, to sit
in judgment of the copy of Goethe he left balanced on
the little plug-in bathroom heater, to sit in judgment of
the judgment he heaped on himself. Now there's more tea,
more anecdote, more money. Maybe fewer visits to certain
family stories, partially replaced long ago anyway perhaps
by a little society of writers who show each other their
works. Calm me down then, Horace. Huge blue grapes
soak the morning paper, and the rinds of several yellow
grapefruit from Escondido lie squeezed out on white
plates. I feel I have to do something for us all,
so reach up and touch the switch amid fancy free
turbulence. It's not all music but I can hear it
that way, the anomalous ring of cash registers, people
brushing shoulders, and little one-swallow paper cups.
A hamburger, a beer, and three cheers for the opposable
thumb. When we're ready we'll start back through litter
and devil's grass to a different water's edge, brilliant
little sketches quoted at random against a spangle of sea
light. The great spoked wheel that prevents us from trying
to slip through its singing teeth, a rag of underpants
stained with axle grease, discarded wads of hair clogging
the employment office, all images are the same, I never
thought I'd look like this. There are many people
dancing and I cast my eyes about blindly, featherless
bird in a child's hands, gong of the symbol attracting
meaning, all images are the same. To the poem. I am
not looking in that direction. He used to sit on the back
steps with a half head of iceberg lettuce and a saltshaker.
Hold 'er newt. Money is so small a thing when you have it

and then you don't advance the art or typify the age
with your yacht tied up in Bimini awaiting your arrival.
I'll get back to his hands, wrapping a book, when the coast
is clear. Could you please phrase that in about nine words?

Linda Connor

SIX PHOTOGRAPHS

Hands, Canyon de Chehy, Arizona, 1982



Bella Coola, British Columbia, Canada, 1981

Arizona, 1982

New Mexico, 1981

Petroglyphs, Hawaii, 1983

Great Galley, Horseshoe Canyon, Utah, 1982

Stephen Rodefer

FLOWERING

CURBED BY GREASE, ploy, and hope in blooming, I beat these wings over surf and shore. I am expanded in deep thievery to mount therefrom great honor, great horror.

We achieve our oars in hourly time. It cannot be too soon, and it will not be too late. If dreaming is true, the other is craved. It grows heavier on you, and older are you made simultaneous to descend, as frequent then to mount, minus one, all following. There *was* no bed existed without the memory of another.

Without hands feet so slow among the jags. You sorrow them. And kindly star some gift or other grudge, like lightning bug to plower, gnat to light. Look down furrow to the grapes. All leaving I perceived to show itself the bottom. The bearings alternated shadows, the vengeful bay that cantered erect to draw the stars.

It is the city like a little cloud, a ditch of forecemeat by the hill, where founders the forgotten irritant, piled neat with people. No one will reveal the theft, yet every flaming steals its fuel from buried ignorance. The city is the hill. It rises so upon its bridgework, to conceal the slaughter that confounded it.

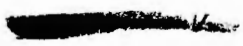
It is a rock hangs out to keep us up, though we are pushed below it. Attendant gibes and sways they mark and turn us. Hearing makes us certain. The fathers are consumed in flower above the pipe, where each next is placed beside his brother, sisters. The looked-for gate laments the artifice.

Thousands say what one can utter. Don't deny desire to bend toward home. In your arms and vengeance I will hold my tongue, which cries out for conversant length, cursing the fever crew below.

Neither family affection, nor respect before, nor the dire love that holds our circumstance, can kill in us the ardor that experiences the world direct. We heave our pace from campment windily to flank to trail the sky. The unfolding stages mind—what throws up own into our hands.

Put forth solely on the surface then, with the company which has never itself remained, but turned its landmark to surpass the peopled world this side of furtherance. Think where we began. We were not made to be bolts—but to chase change, take turns, harbor following. Oars are ours so made so low that morning at times turns our flight to foolish left, night already on the pole. There appears there is a highlight dim with distance. Five times we waver and enter the narrow hard. And there appears there to be a navigation stars mistook.

Sometimes though in which we joy. For beyond the spoil, beyond the wreck of otherness and difference, another whirl will strike our forepart, another ocean teem us to its swell. Till submerged and struck—the distance dimmed, the guidebook torn—we fly the sheets up citified to resist the edge whose rocks and lineation led us to its forge—whose margins then seize looming, imagine landing, demand still heading, their facility cited passably on the prominent shore.



Allen Fisher

BEL AIR

At last it octobers, a tremendous
mist descends on my head
trip a cat
an obo hits my incisor
I fall back
"Good Morning, this is the News"
Is this naıveté or integrity —
this simpleness or confidence to gaze
with intelligent vitality with
numerosity a
splendid buzz from a razor that,
spaced out on a slowed down recording,
reveals a fluff in the magnetic arrangement.
This is Europe
it's not even a terminal.
Forget arrangement. Stop.
Replace with manipulation. Stop.
"Thankyou, but this gets us no where."
A Burglar near the end of the century
looks out over his balcony
and reinterprets the State,
Everything now appears to take place outside
Work's quantum determines the permanence of violent conditions.
Of course he's sick of it!

Shall we follow?
He leaves under the sign
'Café du Dôme'
immediately we are living in a Still-life
The Painter steps through a gate of bamboo wicker
a radar pulse at centimetre wavelengths

strikes her left cheek is
partially absorbed
no one attends to its flow's relations
adjust in due ratio
The room is in the rest frame
manifested by drops on the glass
This is the situation. What happens next
requires our happiness.
Each blink tampers with record of it.

2.

Shielded by these particles autumn
offers astonishment.
Instead of organised hatred she
involved in disorderly performance
made necessary by the floods
weaponed through the fence
an entourage of western medicine and humiliation.
She paints at the gate
the struggle of objects for supremacy
The Burglar crosses a room and knocks on
my eyes, He touches my mouth
with the edge of his trembling,
He frames me with my own perception
as it internalises.
A yellow glow seeps past the door
he leaves open
The community buy dogs
to protect him.
Boys argue furiously over
their video systems
The Burglar sells his watch.
The Hamming code suggests
a drop-dead halt.
They are calls for a clean-looking page.

The Painter moves from the gate
persuaded to contain impatience
through unexpected calm and firmness.

Lamentation and grief become the patterned
stable world, make guests of those
who belonged.
She matches the found pattern
of a star map
into a knitted pullover without
a look forward to the outcome except
a knowing of its warmth
recognised through texture
It lifted the debate of production
and autonomy out of the Burglar's
bag still wrapped
in newsprint
and opened it out.

3.

The children recognise the cloud shapes a
mathematician codes as corank one.
They see the dynamics
without knowing the internal parameters
and one girl trailing the drop-offs from
a running toy
turns to her now stationary vehicle,
"We better go inside before it rains".
The Burglar leans out of someone's window,
lowers a box of sand
onto the walkway. He
is insecured by men and scraps of paper
permitting him to live.
The Painter follows a path to a simple hut.
In the wet an umbrella loses its
commodity function. She
rejects this. Professionalism's
insistence incites her anger.
I am tired of the news
and play through a contemporary
Quartet at twice its intended speed,
swapping one note for another
then dropping loud breaks of sound
mid-rhythm into my weakness

leave my initial appetency
for another weave.
The reflected radar pulse
returns through the window with a
second. The star map begins to craze.

There is talk suddenly of mortice locks,
with another, hasp and staple,
inside an alarm sounds
from a car in the road
we know, beforehand, we are in a city
We call this knowledge but
are also in out of place
no room to move without limits
The Burglar rings a bell for help
It is a mistake
We are alarmed and our
vibration changes colour
randomly our rhythm chocks
and my breath catches hers.
She leaves a half ounce of casein
to soak along side the alcohol
and ammonium carbonate
It is enough to fix the image
made of the Burglar
She continues to walk away from us
up the path to the hut
without identity, carrying
a torn drawing marked 'Studies
for the engraving: Adam and Eve'.

4.

A reader follows the marks up the path
occasionally losing balance from
may be
synaesthesia
stopped short by the figure
of Blake, kicking away sand and pebbles,
joining the path
naked beneath his raincoat,

locks my eyes.
I imagine he has just been
writing a tract on astrology
"Irrational action," the Painter notes,
"From rational self-preservation."
I respond to the stimuli realised
as alien to my experience.
The mathematician adds a calculation
through spurious adaption to realistic needs
This paternal acre is a colony a
usurped matrilocality
"The stars," Blake could have added, "Advise,"
mitigating fear of the inexorability
of social processes you create
as reader.
The Burglar moves that
everything negative
is due to the outside
A flight of birds,
released to tell the time,
superimposes heat patterns on the star map.

This creates a spatial illusion
One colour appears above the other
through its transparency.
What may have been noise
gets read as fresh knowledge.
It carries understanding that the
collective distribution of virtual utterances
creates the social set-up the
institutions breeding
value judgements about innate tendencies
or irreversible actions.
The Burglar moves over another barrier
behind the window
unaware a camera
records this onto film.

5.

It becomes apparent from the film

a dance is underway
The Painter moves towards the open
hut. The path has muddied
before her from heavy boots
and the overlapping tracks
of a bicycle. It creates an
apprehension which increases her
exaltation gives it momentum.
She stops on a stone to sustain
deep breaths and
reels from them.
The smell of elm bark accentuates
this. Women like her participate
in the war against coöption.
What she creates prevents subjugation
by the State, but it is no longer possible
to point out exactly
how.
Yelping dogs remain quite distinct
from bird life. Yet some of
the same she threw at her painting
remained there, became gems there,
what blew back from the throw
took some of the slurry from the path.
She enters the hut to find she is
there with three others. They sit in silence
smiling.
A loud bang moves through them,
followed by a draught.
They all rise and walk down a
second path. She begins to
question this. Her palms are itching.
A playback is underway on a wall
with accentuated wood grain.
The silhouettes of the viewers
interfere with this, but
clearly there is no figure on the
display. They watch a window open
and net curtains lift. They see drops
of rain move across the floor. A
chair lifts from the corner and

moves through the window. There is
a sound of shovelling. Everyone
begins to get the creeps. Their laughter
ceases. A box of sand shuffles
across the floor to the window.
"Stop it!"
The Painter turns to the others,
they are asleep and lean over themselves.
The smell and colours moving in the
room complex. This pink noise
becomes an image
set before her.
"Stop it!"
She turns to the others but is now asleep.
The Burglar switches off the playback
and moves to the window.
It is raining. Its breeze
turns a wooden toy on the play box.

"What's going on?" the Painter asks.
Their coldness astonishes her.
In such a set-up of standardisation and
threatening sameness, she is positively
cathected. Their silence becomes
the voice of an estranged society.
The pattern of the star map at her feet
has settled into a streamlined adjustment.
What it now tells her is useless.
In the walkway a man carries pavings on a
trolley to the sanded mud and begins
to lay them down.
I lay back on a pillow to feel his
movements recorded by the light on the ceiling
and the sound of his ram.
The loose bricks, old frame, and some
discarded footwear, form a heap in the walkway.
"It's over the top," the Painter said,
"It alienates the reader."
There is an emptiness
measured in proportions.
Democracy is given a high rating

on the opinion poll. She takes down
a bottle marked 'Pure Water'
from the shelf,
"Shall we fuck first?"

6.

"Anyone else want to ring the bell?"
the conductor asks.
I cross the city road to the walkway.
On the slab a scraped block of ox-gall
to break the tension
The Painter is in the garden
following a thrush.
Children are roller skating with
a ball on new paving.
I lift a tract from the shelf
and weigh it. No physical
entity escapes this surveillance.
It frees all concern about issues
of internal consciousness — violent
motions, unknown forces, tortuously
curved, even multiply-connected
geometry. Dealing with a point
simply makes contradiction. This
swarming, the mathematician
calls multiplicity. "It's a
matter of intensities," the Painter adds,
"And velocities and temperatures and
decomposable distances,
"You have to use your
intelligent body
to *feel* it." So much needs to be done
to know the consequence of shape.

January 1984.

Jed Rasula

THE TENT OF TIMES

There is a tent of times,
a raft of sites,
a slave escaped from Huck's hometown.
There is an overgrown shrine.
Wading in & out of my dream
I came on bits of broken glass,
floating in silt like bubbles.
Transmitters, glowing eggs
wring the gaze, snapping at phrases.
Red ants scurried in fingerprint patterns under my clothes
as I struggled with hers.
They came off quickly:
hands like bulls in a pasture,
strumming the soil,
priapic stones' astronomical gloss on the heath.
A trough of warm water snakes through Atlantis
sending up palms off the Cornish coast.
A spray in the head from the hearth of cures.
Haloes are pods of interior voice,
the prompter's bubble intact on the head
like a shield from Athena,
tells not what to say
but what must be *known.*
An echo, a shell of the soul,
roaring in coiled folds
the warmest memory of ocean.
A little tub where islands fit.
Amore splashing,
waves recoiling,
is *distance* that tightens the passing years,

each seething leaf
each trickle of mud
each lurking face shaped up through thaw
not only grins but leers,
flexing the knotted pigments
erotic fragrance elapsed in waves on my bones,
Mithraic honey drugged out in the spread,
wriggling and glued to memory's hive
of heat seeped in through an open wound
where Charlotte appears
with an impulse of milk released,
my veins the pump,
chlorophyll dilating leaves
on years' gone sperm & beating heart
pour into that pubic mulch in the skull
that services soul with its odor of water on summer dust.
A veil of silt, a trail of shells
threading the stars, parts
implied by other parts.
To constitute zero out of the mud.
Deluded by bubble of words?
A blade from Arthurian murk?
Buzzing nature sustains

all possible illusions.
Time's grief passing
or *slipping* might split us in two,
into moisture & dust
& the scratching stars.

No wonder I splash it up,
no wonder the key of my blood slides into the lock direct.
Ananke twists her fate device
& the world is spread out on a tray
in the boiler of the brain.
Archaic compulsions
in water & soil,
metals engaged in the blood,
ducks from the banquet still digesting,
shadows on the trunk of the apple complying.

What do I say to the skunk of time,
that these are mine?
the soul stretched flat
like a lengthening shadow before them?

To show & tell is not so simple.
Pages of earth will need to be turned
—not blown like leaves of a book & the flame of the candle,
but known, and in knowing, open and flow,
and ink to blur, and fouled rivers dried to a crust.
To *see* at least—or know enough not to?—
knowing the earth to be barter now,
the life of Fate a political gimmick:
the markets have captured the stars.
Empedocles hovers in shirt-tails with Tiny Tim,
their slobbery duty performed in victorian garrets,
eternal fragments possessed with a gasp,
the heart dims out for a second and then resumes
—hands at the keyboard like crabs in Scriabin sonata perfumes—
writing and WRITTEN the intercom voice heard miles away in
the night
to hear Busoni awake in a bird
with a voice that shifts down through the gears
of assembled syntax events,
crumbling Mars attached to your vest I surmise,
a low here,
a high there,
wind all day
and power outage events
to suck the air out of Lear.
I crust, I blear, I gnaw at the drift I intuit:
the season's narcissus gone stiff in the glass
—my craving, their smell, are one.

Why do I want to read you the Orders of Wales,
the four Bright Books blushed scarlet by autumn,
running through winter's spring not far behind
to color one leaf in my blood,
ragging the scale.

Rage at the wind.
Rage at the sun.
The photographed mushroom glaze
has lusted over.
The shine shines.
Emphasis where?
The sender comes. Unwrap it.
The shell resounds.
The ground fills up with stones—
the inner earth creeps out.
Flakes & shards, concepts, glues.
Something grows.
Creatures come & go.

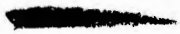
Taking a clue from the organ grinder
looking up into the sky
is a function of sex.

Somewhere a sleeper lights up: no one to know.

The words are the argument-maker.

I matter, each passing cloud is bothered to mean.

Each *maker* evaporates too.



Judith Gleason

from OYA, IN PRAISE OF THE GODDESS

OYA as Black-River-Cloth
OYA as Lightning

What follows are excerpts from a book I am writing on the Yoruba goddess Oya, whose name literally means "It tears." The excerpts are from a chapter on her natural manifestations as tornado, river and lightning. The part about tornado (including a discussion of winds and tropical weather in general) is certainly too long to include here (20 pages). Chapters to follow this one include discussion of Oya as goddess of the dead and patron of the Egungun masquerade society, of Oya as buffalo and her relation to hunting, of Oya as leader of the market women and witches, together with a good deal of personal material on various ways I have experienced this goddess.

Although I realize that the material here presented is rather "scientific," I hope for that it is not the less poetic. What I am trying to achieve in this (albeit difficult book) is the presentation of transpersonal power as process. The west has a paralysing idea of goddess-on-a-pedestal. Well, here is an African power whose traces may be seen in certain natural patterns as well as in transformative moments of human consciousness. She has also been anthropomorphized by the Yoruba into a legendary queen (of Nupe origin) who became the favorite wife of Shango, himself both king and thunder-god. In an earlier incarnation she was wife of Ogun, god of iron and patron of hunters.

According to Ifa, the Niger river was produced in the following manner: The king of the Nupe (northern neighbors of the Yoruba) consulted the oracle in time of war. How to prevent invasion? Ifa said that the beseiged king should procure a black cloth and appoint a virgin to tear it. The king's choice fell upon his own daughter, who ceremonially ripped the cloth into two pieces and flung them on the ground. *O-ya*: "she tore," with the result that the black cloth became water flowing protectively about the nucleus of the Nupe Kingdom.[1] That nucleus still exists today as Jebba Island.

Curiously, the birth of the Niger from black cloth torn is by the Yoruba attributed to the action of a foreign princess from a bordering kingdom, traditionally adversative to their own. The Nupe themselves do not reall the event. It is not part of their mythos. Oya is always said by the Yoruba to be of Nupe (*tápà*) origin; the Yoruba (not the Nupe) identify Oya with the River Niger. Oya is, then, both foreigner and boundary. As a legendary personage she was taken into Yoruba history when she married Shango, spiritual progenitor of all subsequent kings of Oyo—imperial expression of Yoruba culture.

To a western observer such psychological themes as invasion, introjection of the alien, and projection seem implicit in the myth of the river's genesis as in the legends of Oya as Shango's consort. To internalize this persistent "otherness" of Oya and to reflect upon the tearing of the black cloth as an emergency preservative of the self's hegemony is not, I think, to do violence to Yoruba myth but rather to bear witness to its depth and complexity. Like all great "likely stories" this one seems to work on a variety of levels, including the very process of interpretation. For to rip the black cloth is to produce not only a river but an entire spectrum of light: that multi-colored wind-garment of Oya which is the Yoruba equivalent of the veil of Maya.

Over some the black cloth settles early on and so gently that whosoever beneath is hardly aware of the blind. Good, the black cloth temporizes, all the while imperceptibly drawing itself tighter and tighter until one day—who knows why?—its victim finally acknowledges the pressure, the ever-narrowing options, the imminence of annihilation. Aha, now the black cloth condenses itself about its precarious c o n t e n t s with a vengeance, sucking it further and further down until hardly anything outside is recognizable. Supposedly familiar voices are strangely heard on the other end of the wire, which crackles and spits like the bad connection it always was. Children look frightened, fragile as flowers on the surface of a dark pond; and adult faces betray the enlarged pores of indifference or the harshly engraved lines of contempt. So self-worth,

which had already shriveled to a tight knot in the stomach, to a cat's hairball, to a candle niched in a wind tunnel, to a word scrawled on a blank page in the middle of the night, to the shriek of a bandaged mouth finally provides its own viaticum. Now or never, something whispers. Time to find the infinitesimal flaw along the selvage edge and rip, rip the black cloth. That process is Oya, who now surrounds the beseiged self with her vital flowing power.

Inexorable though the gods may be, it is always within their own domains that they are so. Bound like the Furies of Aeschylus to the binding spells of ancient prerogative, their curses and blessings take the same form. At a moment of crisis when the present state is about to be overwhelmed by what appears to be an alien force, a neighboring yet congenital princess is found to help out, to tear the black cloth, and a ring of dark water is traced about an embattled island. But what does it mean to be thus surrounded? Not much communication with the mainland, that's for sure, and a terrible assertive stress along the peripheries of personality, together with an irrepressible tendency to reverse inner and outer, figure and ground. Such would seem to be Oya's law, to which she herself was confined (not by the Ifa oracle, whose priests preside over conditions facilitating her *communication* with mankind) by an unintelligible power which, before there was ever human consciousness to suffer afflictions of the gods or to analyse the lambent structures of water, wind and fire, began to spell out of the mere beginnings of "difference" a certain type of surface boundary action by which are captivated all things (including all souls) in motion.

A strange allotment. Who else would want it—this perverse path of transformative violence? Read her signs: wirey-armed umbrellas raised in celebratory protection from the elements wrenched inside out by the gusts and thrust by their disgusted carriers into the nearest receptable. Traces everywhere abound of this besetting edginess which triggers invasive reversals, sentient involutions along the selvage edge of perception which (even in inorganic matter) are tantamount to invagination. Ah, chauvanists, watch out; the threat is everywhere in nature itself—resistance turning receptical. Thus the shore gets itself shored up. And thus on a stormy day in New York Oya reminds us how it was at the primordial Onset when she was given/took on the terrible task of becoming a black cloth goddess.

True, as Heraclitus observed, you never step twice in the same stream. But if you stand there for a while, facing up-river, you will observe a translucent buffer continuously forming about your obtrusive knees, while behind them (looking now over your shoulder) little linked

processions of vortices are flowing in alternate pairs. The ones on the right are rotating left; those on the left spin right; one after the other as in a chain of embroidered threads, each gyrates responsively from the outer edge inwards. Meanwhile, on both banks the river is similarly responding to warm, earthy pressure by a double circulation of currents from mid-surface to shore: down, under and towards the center, then rising and bending shore-wards again. Preoccupied by thoughts of mutability, the wading philosopher is apt to neglect the samenesses going on here—these motions of liquid responding to shifts of temperature and speed, as well as to obtrusions like rocks or his own legs. But out of such encounters are created periodic interpenetrating forms which *do* persist through time despite continuous displacement of one spate of molecules by another.[2] Activated by the flow, such patterns, though with circumstance varying in scope and intricacy, remain constant. And here where the river parts at Jebba Island to rejoin in a vast braid of royal vortices, we find the voice of Oya as Nupe Princess.

By the time the Niger river arrives at Jebba Island it is in the process of slowing down after a tumultuous display of white energy—formerly a series of rapids in the course of which perished Mungo Park, now the Kainji dam. At this point the river symbolically runs "red" like the human circulatory system with which Leonardo da Vinci identified earth's flowing waters. Rivers (as opposed to rapids) are always "red" and feminine to the Yoruba. Thus, it is possible to imagine the nuclear Nupe kingdom as a well-protected foetus in the womb of its no longer virginal princess. Again, as was the case of the tornado wooed with snails, wild woman-power, rent, turns beneficially pregnant.

Why, then, was the princess' torn cloth (the bifurcated flood) a black rather than an immaculate white one? Black in most cultures—Hindu and Aztec as well as Yoruba—is associated with sacerdotal and magical transformation. The ripping of the cloth was an act of deterrent magic performed to save a high-risk kingdom. But there is also an hydraulic explanation for the color of that saving remnant.

If you stood on the banks of Jebba Island for an entire solar year, you would see two floods roar past. In June, fed by rainy-season run-offs from the Atakora mountains, the waters of the Niger swell into the so-called "white" spate. Six months later along comes a mysterious "black" flood, laden with decaying organic matter—ideal cloak of inundation to be thrown upon unsuspecting invaders from elsewhere. Thus, I imagine, the nascent Nupe kingdom was once by magically invoked natural means defensively triumphant over dust-laden invaders who had never seen rivers rising high in the midst of the dry season.

But what is the reason for this second, black flood? And how intrinsic to Oya's character as ritual portrays it?

Just as one never sees the wind, but only its effect, so does the double flood of the Niger bear witness to a geological history else obliterated by encrustations of the present. For centuries European explorers went wandering everywhichway in search of the Niger's elusive source. Was it south? Was it north? Or somewhere in between? How, were it not for its double flood could any explorer guess that which any African philosopher might have predicted? For like life, like death, like the generative human soul, the great river itself is double.

The southeastern slope of Oya's river began its hydraulic life as a sort of Pleistocene *wadi* in the Sahara desert. The rains came and the river flowed; they abated and it recoiled. The first Pluvial (corresponding to the First Ice Age in temperate zones) gave the river a push across the Badjibo Sill, where the rapids mentioned above were formed. After this push from the Pluvial, it was up to the river itself to find a path of least resistance down to the sea. Sloping through future Yoruba country to meet its powerful travelling companion, the Benue, the lower Niger in process sought peace in the Bight of Benin. However, at a certain point in the story death struck. High pressure anti-cyclones evaporated its Saharan tributaries into sandy depressions, which today look from the air like imprints of leafless trees. Occasionally, in summer, these skeletal tracks are flash-flooded as though with Pleistocene memories. But no more than mirages can such as these maintain the dynamic needs of what threatened then to be an extinguishing trajectory.

Meanwhile, the northeastern slope of the river we see today was having its own hydrological problems. But not with sources. These for this part of the river remained forever fresh in the Guinea highlands. However, a shift of the earth's crust during the Tertiary era deflected the flow of the stream from its original path across the Bara plain. It had become accustomed to emptying into a deep trench, which it thus filled to create an inland sea in the proto-Sahara. Then dry winds, forming dunes, and worse—a series of sinister ergs—beat the seeking river back from every access to its now desiccating destination. Unable to get out of the Bara plain, the river had no alternative but to back up and flood it. Heavy rains in the Guinea highlands of its origin persisted. The Bara slowly became a sea. Finally, by chance, in the process of submerging every parcel of earth within reach, the engorged and frantic Djoliba (for so the river is called by those who live today upon the plain) stumbled upon the narrow Sill of Tosaye across which it could discharge its nour-

ishing flood into the starving riverbed below.

Thus both rivers, becoming one, were saved. Geologists speak of a "capture." But of which? By whom? Across the *corpus callosum* do impulses from the brain's right hemisphere capture the left? Or does left capture right? I think of this stunning hydraulic event as an equal and tremendous relief to both of them. A starving infant is suddenly rescued by a bereaved mother. The presence of music is asserted after a day of tortuous thinking.

The plain still floods, though, with heavy Tertiary dreams, floods even though the immediate rainfall is dangerously diminishing and every year beyond the precincts of inundation more millet crops are stillborn, more wells are coffined. It takes many months for this grassy inner delta of the Bara to fill up and begin to run off. Hence the delayed "black" spate at Jebba Island. Downstream, where brackish Oya gives birth to nine saline estuaries at the outer delta, the two floods more or less coincide at the mid-winter solstice. But those merging waters are an entire rain-year's distance the one from the other. That is Oya. One might call her a time-warp. Again and again hints of meaning are generated along the seam between myth and natural occurrence, at least when it comes to speaking of Oya, for such is the investigatory mode suggested by her very presence. When the black cloth is ripped a magical transformation restores syncope to pulsing life again. History recurs. A double flood superimposes one delta upon another. The dead return wrapped in swirling mystery of cloth. The river remembers.

Upstream of Jebba Island there is a bridge to accommodate the modern equivalent of that traffic from the north which the ancient king of Nupe was emboldened (by means of his gallant river-bound daughter) to risk taking control of. Control of death as well as of life. Not properly taking those swirling, downward sucking currents about the giant stride of the bridge into account, as any woman will now and again throw herself passionately into the flood, I risked drowning there. Was it the thirteenth or fourteenth of December? I can find no record in my journal of the ecstatic, solitary and very un-African swim. I remember making a great effort to reach a thick line of reeds which under normal conditions must in that place mark the shore. But the rains which had followed the Intertropical Front northward a full tilt of the earth ago had so swollen the river now as to ensconce the roots of those reeds in a flux of what to the exploring feet seemed bottomless. Yet shoreward was certainly the direction to go, even without a shore; for reeds break the speed of the run-off.

Later that night the oldest man in Jebba told me they no longer sacrifice a cow there as the floods fling past the island. Times change. The remaining inhabitants of Jebba are few because most of the local fishermen have gone up-river to try their luck in the lake behind the Kainji dam. But it is Islam which is largely responsible, the old man said, for neglect of the propitiations. "Odd," I noted dateless in my journal, "though they think of the river as a male force here, surely that was not always the case, for once they gave it a cow—as up-river for Harrako Dikko." By which I meant that just as up at Lato, in Songhay country, the river is ruled by a female divinity they call Harrakoi Dikko, who receives a yearly sacrificial offering of a cow; so once at Jebba they must have invoked (by whatever name) Oya. One does not throw a female animal to a male divinity.

All along the river, which aeons ago became one double impulse—wave and trough sounded from source to sea—memories of correct ritual practice are secretly preserved in form, if not in substance, in patterns rather than in molecules, like those repetitive chains of vortices fore and aft of Jebba Island, like the idea of a cow not thrown sacrificially off the rocks there any more, like an obedient father's daughter thrown into the flood at the purificatory turn of the watery year, as recalled downstream at Onitsha and Idah.[3]

Is Oya without or is she within? Which stream does the capturing? For those who cross by way of the bridge such questions can hardly be said to exist. But for those unable to resist immersion in the destructive element she is, the parameters of her black-cloth-power seem infinite as those correlative qualities of consciousness towards which she whips her putative worshippers before mercifully releasing them to swim on over as best they can to the graspable green edge of (no shore)...

A river makes its own model. First a few drops, then a filament of water, and eventually a route is engraved for whatever surge from the sources to follow. Waterfingers, feeling their way along earth-surfaces of least resistance, instantly actualize, as it were, their own premonitions. For a long time, along with Kenneth Craik[4] I thought that in all the realm of so-called inorganic phenomena rivers must be unique in that regard. Then, as part of the present attempt macrocosmically to understand Oya,

I sat down to read about lightning, only to discover with astonishment that which among meteorologists is by now common knowledge. Thus from two correlates was born the possibility of a unified field theory of the natural intelligence of the goddess, to which, as we shall see in Chapter Four, the behavior of her animal avatar confidently picking its way through the densest of forests can be added as a third structural correspondence.

Lightning, if myth be in accord with manifestations of inorganic matter, must be the last of Oya's natural patterns of utterance; for, by the time she adopted (or "stole") its intricacies, the Oya of sacred oral traditions was no longer a Nupe princess but already a mature woman—senior wife of the fourth reigning king of the Yorubas. Indeed, Oya's electrical career is so entwined with Shango's, that it would be fruitless to talk of it without first introducing the great thunder-god-king to any readers who may not yet be aware of his existence. *Kabiesi*!

When Shango dances, and no Orisha dances with more vitality and excitement, he gestures alternately to the heavens (as if throwing a thunderbolt from there) and to his balls (wherein the "thunderstones" of his fecund impetuosity are contained). Thus as a god Shango exalts; but as a human being he found life unendurable. Insecure as king (perhaps because of his questionable origin, variously attributed to a morganatic or to an incestuous union), in order to consolidate his power—challenged by rival factions within and kingdoms without, from his capital at old Oyo Shango dispatched his favorite wife, Oya, to a neighboring Borgu kingdom to procure spoken-lightning. A certain medicinal preparation, owned by the king of Bariba (part of the Borgu federation), when placed beneath the tongue enables the user to spit forth thunder stones with voltage powerful enough to knock whole armies out. Queen Oya, so the "likely story" goes, performed Shango's commission with her usual charming diplomacy; but secretly she kept—as "dash" for her trouble—a little bit of lightning for her own.

Unfortunately, while trying out his new power, Shango mis-directed a bolt or two towards the precincts of his own palace. Horrified at having thus annihilated those whose preservation should have been his profoundest concern, Shango fled the city of Oyo and on the way (where? who knows?) hung himself from the *àyàn* tree, henceforth patron of drums and drummers. Then, a miracle. Shango hung, but instead of dying he disappeared into the ground and became an Orisha, whose judgment is thunder, whose benevolence is rain. Oya, who had faithfully followed her husband to Kósò, place of his apotheosis, kept on going in the direction of her Nupe home until, overwhelmed by depression, or so the

story goes, she disappeared into a marshy swamp at Irá.

Although the Nigerian government placed a statue of Shango at the Kainji dam to celebrate its dynamos and power lines, and although in the New World Shango is often syncretized with Santa Barbara (patron saint of electrical storms), mastery of lightning is always one way or another attributed to Oya. Her Catholic counterpart is Candelaria—Our Lady of Candlemas. The zig-zag borders of her Egungun masquerade children denote lightning. And, closer to home, when a folkloric drama about the Orisha was recently staged by a Latino theatre company in New Jersey, Oya made her entrance in a purple turban from which sprouted a single jagged bolt. Yet even though Shango's meteorological competence patently resides not in the glow but the rumble, not in the sear but in the thrust of the "thunder stones" (pre-historic celts) unearthed by his priests at the base of trees struck, why is it that the sacerdotal establishment won't come out publicly and say that to Oya belongs the light and to Shango the sound of nature's most theatrical production? Why? Sexism? The political clout of Shango priests in Oyo? Or could there after all be a modicum of scientific truth in the old story about Oya's trip to a foreign king on behalf of her harassed husband? A scientific truth reflected in the apparent contradictions of iconography and cult dogma?

Obviously, lightning precedes thunder. But lightning—small spurts of it—also precedes the brilliant flashes that we actually see. In other words, lightning too makes its own model, but at such tremendous speeds and at such great distances from the observer, that its imaginative behavior most often goes unnoticed save by the inspired intuitions of African mythologues and, more recently, by various ingenious recording devices developed by the western scientific community.

During the convective build-up of cumulonimbus storm clouds an enormous electrical tension develops between the negatively charged central region of the cloud (undergoing rapid condensation) and the ground. When this powerful attraction exceeds the break-down potential of 25,000 volts per inch, discharge must occur, beginning near the ground-beholding base of the cloud. But no matter how irresistible the pull, its electric potential simply cannot support a spontaneous arc thrown across five kilometers of atmosphere—under normal conditions a rather indifferent conductor. An ionized path through the air has to be pioneered by a relatively low-charged series of impulses known as the "stepped leader."

A modest cascade of electrons descends about 300 feet at a time, after each "step" pauses about fifty microseconds in order to find a semi-ionized path of least resistance, then continues by such a fits-and-

starts method along its tortuous way, in the process forming numerous lateral branches as contiguous pent-up energies suddenly uncover themselves to the parent stream. All these "decisions" in our time-frame seem instantaneous. Only a faint series of glows mark their accomplishment—a series seen (if observed at all) to be spatial rather than temporal. As the forward tip of this leader nears the ground, anticipatory streamers rise to meet it. From tree tops, from pointed pieces of metal, they tease acceptance from the descending charge which quickly "selects" the most prominent and the conducting channel is accomplished. Now a sudden sucking action pulls all loose electrons in the vicinity of the leader down to the ground. Called the "return stroke" because the process initiates at the bottom of the channel, this is the brilliant flash everybody sees: "lightning!" publicly acclaimed. It may strike again and again now, rapidly down the prepared channel, as inter-cloud tributaries created by the same method liberate other densely charged sectors.

Each strike, however, remains a two-way process. The step-ladder is replaced by a so-called "dart leader," which re-ionizes the path for the luminous suction-motion to follow. Then, and only then comes thunder—loudest natural sound in the world—to speak in praise, as it were, of the consummation. But what actually causes it, this royal thunder?

The unimaginable heat inside the channel (as much as 30,000 degrees centigrade), pressing against its walls, forces its expansion in the form of a shock wave which, after each lightning stroke, relaxes into an acoustical follow-up of much lower amplitude. What we hear depends upon where we're standing, but in general the crash comes from the base of the channel and the ensuing rumble from its molten twistings and turnings. But crash and rumble, besides being inadequate to describe the magnificent timbre of thunder, far from exhaust its sonorous possibilities. There's a boom followed by silence, for example, which reflects an energetic high-altitude flash, and, seldom heard but most significant in our context, there's a "rare ripping noise that can be imagined as the tearing of some cosmic cloth."[5] Meteorologists who have heard don't know what causes this anomaly. Perhaps, they say, it is an acoustical record of a stepped leader which didn't make it all the way to the ground.

It is impossible to describe electrical storms without falling into the language of reciprocal desire. The Yoruba symbolize earth and sky as two halves of a closed calabash. Meteorologists speak of the ionosphere and the earth's surface as plates of a spherical condenser, the top of which must maintain a residual plus charge and the bottom of which must always be minus—a perpetual negative propensity. Even if the atmosphere separating the "plates" is not a very good conductor, some

leakage does occur. A perpetual current of about 360,000 volts escapes, a voltage sufficient to discharge the earth's "condenser shell," were it not for thunderstorms, which wondrously generate enough supply current to maintain the electrical balance. About two thousand thunderstorms, on the average, must be taking place at any given moment in order to satisfy the positive yearnings of those immobile electrons on the ground. But some hours of the global day-night continuum are more fruitful in this regard than others. The recharging process peaks between 14 and 20 o'clock (Greenwich time) because of the stupendous effect of late afternoon and early evening outbursts along the West African and Latin American portions of the Intertropical Front.[6] *Kabiesi*!

Mythologically, this desire between earth and sky, whose accomplishment Oya's lightning facilitates, is expressed in two ways. First, as an incestuous attraction between Shango and his mother, which is always merely hinted at or "displaced"—in the manner of dream symbolism. This is a most problematic aspect of Shango, the various iconographic and literary aspects of which will be most appropriately discussed in the chapter to follow. Briefly, here, it is a desire often expressed as anger (many are the stories of Shango's getting rid of his mother or in some way subsuming her) and as judgmental rage against others, particularly against those who (like Shango himself) do not tell the truth.

Many students of Yoruba religion have wondered at the paradoxical explosions of a Shango whose jovial, seductive charm can so quickly turn tyrannical, whose strong feminine aspect (we would say "the mother in himself") often masquerades as super machismo, whose outrage at the misconduct of others would seem to imply unresolved impulses to castigate the guilty "me." Familiarity with the weather of his kind leads me to talk of Shango's fated dynamic of discharge. Discharge of everything—rain-seed, rhythmical impulses, acoustical fury, immediate discharge of every turbulence within the sweep of his imperious mind. As mediator between earth and sky Shango is captive of polarization: ire ionized.

The double axe which sprouts from Shango's sacred dance wand and statuary, a form sometimes depicted as a stubborn ram's horns, is not really a threatening image. Proliferous, rather, polarized, it has sometimes by art critics been compared to swelling breats. Shango, the fertile force. Here I would like to suggest an added resemblance to the upper, growing edge of a mounting cumulonimbus cloud. (Compare Diagrams V and XI). Weathermen call this the "thunder-head" of the storm. Its psychological analogue is that of extraverted sensuality. Mythologically it dramatizes the plight of the king who refused to be confined to his "leader core."

The reciprocal desire of earth for sky and sky for earth realizes itself as fertility. In Yorubaland human fertility's paradigm is gemination. Inseparable companions of the sweltering leader core, Shango and Oya mythologically produce twins. That is, over and over they reproduce the collaborative identity established in the turbulence of their regenerative storms. The Yoruba people themselves, under the aegis of Shango and Oya, give birth to an astonishing number of fraternal twins (as many as 42 per 117 deliveries!) and the Yoruba skies produce thunderstorms at the second highest rate in the world.[7] Apart from the paradigmatic fertility of their royal gods, what could possibly be the connection? Lightning, as every school child knows, causes some of the nitrogen in the atmosphere to combine with oxygen. The result—nitric oxide, dissolved in rainfall, is brought to earth as nitrates which, absorbed by the soil, nourish vegetation. And, subsequently, "nourishes" whatever genetic program opts for twins in the womb?

The second myth-system having to do with relations between the charge plates of earth and sky focuses upon a falling-apart and the land's resultant sterility. For the sake of rain propitiation is made by earth to sky in the form of a fish and a bush-rat. What is the psychological meaning of such a sacrifice of small flesh, normally hidden by their environmental matrices—fish by pond-water, bush-rat by undergrowth of forest? I think what earth sacrificed to sky was her vulnerability. And I see a connection between earth's sacrifice and the modicum of lightning Oya, according to myth, according to the Shango establishment, is supposed to have kept for herself. What can a female force more deeply offer than that which is hidden?

Iconographically this little bit of lightning under Oya's tongue is represented by a small pair of swords, by an ornamental sabre, or—in the Americas, by a heavy-duty machete. Warrior woman? Yes, but one who goes before, like a scout sent into the underbrush, like a guerilla. Her way is to facilitate the process of recharging the system. Stepping gingerly, jaggedly, she figures the way out. One word at a time...

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1. Chief Fagbemi Ajanaku, Araba of Lagos, personal communication, Feb. 2, 1977.

2. Here I would like to acknowledge the overwhelming and lingering impression of the following book: Theodor Schwenk, *Sensitive Chaos, The Creation of Flowing Forms in Water and Air*, Schocken Books, 1976. Its images and its philosophy seeped in to a most receptive terrain.

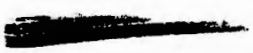
3. See Richard N. Henderson, *The King in Every Man*; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972, pp. 390 and 402. R. S. Seton, "Installation of an Attah of Idah," J.R.A.I., 1928, pp. 255-78.

4. Kenneth Craik, *The Nature of Explanation,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967, p. 59.

5. Arthur A. Few, "Thunder," *Scientific American,* July 1975, p. 90.

6. G. R. Wait, "Aircraft Measurements of Electric Charge Carried to Ground through Thunderstorms," in *Thunderstorm Electricity,* H. R. Byers, ed., Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953. F. J. W. Whipple, "Modern Views of Atmospheric Electricity," *Quarterly Journal of the Royal Meteorological Society,* vol. 64, 1938, 199-213.

7. Robert Farris Thompson, "Sons of Thunder," *African Arts,* Spring, 1971, p. 8. G. J. Afolabi Ojo, *Yoruba Culture,* Ife, Nigeria: University of Ife Press, 1966, pp. 170-171. (Ojo cites C. E. P. Brooks, Climate in Everyday Life, London, 1950, pp. 216-217.)



from THE COLLECTED POEMS OF CHARLES OLSON: 1950-57

Edited by George Butterick

THE ADVANTAGE

1

Where do these
invisible seeds
settle from?

And how are men able
to spore them
into air?

For the gains are
thus communicated.

2

Shall you say
    there are not Powers,
when men spring up on all sides
    (like violets, said Bolyai Farkas)
to a new need?

Men have their proper season, and to that season
    act and image,
      image more than act,
        a rhythm more than image or than act,
proper to them.

3

So if we now again shall call
    the sun a male,
and give him back the moon
    for wife, who'll say
we're wrong? we

who have endured to rotting
    the other way, the making
domestic abstract gods
    of paled-out humans,
father mother son

who'll say
    the root of universe
      is not the root of man,

deny
    the edge of mystery is
      the cutting edge,

cry down
    the act of touch, the dumb thing knocking, knocking
at that door?

FRIDAY, GOOD FRIDAY

friday, Good Friday, which
always reminds me of Walter Strong, who grew up with me
on the Cut in Gloucester, and was such an inbred
he and his sister both drooled as long as we were kids,
and they had to wear bibs. Anyhow, Walter
grew up to be the sharpest gambler in the city
(he was so recognized last year when he got a suspended sentence
for booking the horses). Well, some years ago, one Good Friday,
we were all down to the gas station, sitting around chewing the fat,
when Walter says, "What about a little game, boys." Sez the others,
"Why, Walter! Don't you know? This is Good Friday!"
And Walter, who always sort of drawled after he grew up, answers,
"Whhhat's goooood abooooout it? Allll Iiii can
sssay isss, IIiiii hoooope it'll be goooooood
for meeeee!"

ABSTRACT #1, YUCATAN

the fish is speech, or see
what, cut
in stone, starts, for

when the sea breaks, watch
watch: it is the
tongue, and

he who introduces the words (the
interlocutor) the
beginner of the word, he

you will find, he
has scales, he
gives off motion as

in the sun the wind the light, a fish
moves

I am too fucking innocent to be gay, he roared. Let there be born
a new Banquet, let there be a wild bed, let you
get the hell aside from me with
your too easy advances, your
too easy attacks

I'll not mix my good with Neo-Classicists,
those from the capitals, or who talk about
small town folk. Go by me, Recitalists, all
arguers, even those who are a little bit right

It is too early to be so wise, so bright,
to still stay, or to jump ahead, you, Performers!

Let my lazy brilliant cats do their leaping, their yawning, even shit
in front of us in the circus Ring, without you making any of your quick
back or forward interpretations of, my animals: let all you simplicimusses
shut your pusses, let me be wholly vulgar when fineness is dullness, bright-
ness
es
come a penny apiece, are an arcade, when all you are are peep shows,
through the littlest hole, ass or eye

You of the Theatre, Inigo Jones murdered
against a brick wall, still know nothing, with
your babble of—ah, movement

You of the People, yes,
likewise, and not my great beasts

Swing, sway, bounce—bah, where they belong is
where they are, in the trees, or with the children or, the balls are
walk the dog, see my pretty dance!

And curb same, I say, from me,
the next Passerby

And the truckdriver is more psychotic than you are,
Mayor of Highway America

Both of you, he spat, do a little fucking in public a little thinking
in private, if sway swing bounce grind protest and the

latest McCarran bill
are either art or action—do be homosexual or as frenchy as
Madelein Le Seur, anything, to clean out, your eye and
your arse. Or, give me my money back

If this is all you offer to
what procedes from,
and towards my beasts

coital coital coital, she kept repeating, with her faced turned
to the wall

"Make it clear, both of you, if you can't
make use of it."

And some ate slowly peanut crackers, and the others rushed off into the
rain.

THE CIVIL WAR

Or Captain Philip Sheridan,
quartermaster, getting siege guns
to New Madrid

Or that the average age
of the 100,000 soldiers at Shiloh
must have been 18 - 19

That maybe Sidney Johnston
purposely let himself bleed to death,
he had made such a mess of Donelson

That one has to upset things,
to get at them, that you do have to turn
the ground under.

Or up, is it?

That faces were once unique,

each one looked like itself, it was not
Bell Telephone executives, all up

from the ranks. That a face
ought to fit
who wears it, not belong

to the company (Selig Smith,
4th Indiana, died
with a locket

and the other man
cut off some of Booth's hair,
so that it was Booth

his mother
might say. The way even proof
was particular

One has this difficulty,
nowadays, that the faces are obvious
even when they're open. It's as though

an idea was lost: that you can't do
any more than you are. And therefore
you are. It's as though you really had

secrets. One secret. That you go in there
on the assumption the other guy
is the one who's going to get it

And you find out,
you did. You look
at yourself in the mirror

The mirror
is a civil war

quartermasters and filibusterers
was the beginning
of the new

and all those who hark back
to a better time
ought to get out, they'll never

make it

Now this doesn't mean
one has to put up with
the present, clearly

the successors
of the quartermasters and the filibusterers

ain't anything, they're

worse, they're

out the other side, gone

beyond. They make nothing,

and much of it. They sell

what you quickly

can't make use of (a lady

naked on a horse,

a child

making connections,

a tree

stripped of leaves

will overcome

the attention, leisure

can't be filled

with art

Traffic managers

have no desire

THE THING WAS MOVING

It's so beautiful, life, goddam death
that we have to die, only the mind knows
what lies next the heart or a five-petaled flower
restores the fringed gentians I used to so love
I'd lie amongst them in the meadow near the house
which was later covered by a dump to make an athletic field
and the brook was gone to which we tried to speed our sleds
from the hill the house stood on and which the dump
was meant to join, the loss punctuated by the shooting
my father taught me with the rifle he gave me from the back porch
of the three-decker, the rats living among the cans and peat
as the dump came closer, and I hated
all of it (the same porch the chameleon he had bought me
escaped from, from the cage I'd made it
of old screen when we brought it home from the circus

the smoke from the dump-fires all the time the thing was moving
toward us, covering the meadow, coming from the hill
(where we had had the single cable swing had broke
that day i was alone there and i had flown

out over all the space, and my glasses
beyond me, and my back to this day... and i groping
not to tell my parents, and to find the glasses
to find my way back. The fire-engines
in the evening dousing—and no flames but the littlest, all
smoke turning into steam there, but the excitement...

the concrete sections, when the dump began to reach
the brook, to put it under, like hoops we could not roll
in which—they were so high—we lost ourselves
like tunnels, or took it we were five-figured forms
fit to fill a circle and be acrobats, our heads
wedged but no movement of those sections even
when we pried them and were unknowingly in such danger
as when we built the club-house of railroad ties
on the edge of another flat, the swamp where the man
and his horse and team went down in the quicksand, and we
did not know until after the cops had broken down the structure
and even later when the auto showrooms covered it, and piles
had to be driven... the hunting, of each other, before the brook
was let in and only way above, or below at Chandler Street
was it any more where I had sunk in, where the irises were,
where I had seen my first turtle, or further up, where
girls had swum naked that day I had tittupped
from the piano lesson, seeking my friends, and suddenly,
coming on the pool, had heard the voices first, and slowed
so that I saw them from the bushes (the older woman
turning me back... the invasion

or the ford (below Dick Marsden's house) horses crossed
and we sailed boats, or made dams, the wonder
of the way the hill sloped up there, the gradual way
before it became a suburb and was still the West
(the trench we were sure had been emplacements
of King Phillip's Wars ended before the ford, before
the whole brook system got transverse to what it was below
near where I lived, Hill's Farm getting its fields
from the change of the direction of its flow,
and the topography
the flowers (as well as the ball field)

were located, in my space, by this curving
from west to south, the farm marking the change
and running against the foot of my house, the brick wall
on which all the wood stood which shook
when the wind bellied down that valley and struck
the broad back of the house and I used to think
why the whipping of the house on that third-floor
didn't throw it down, and only that the storm
was not like marching men on a bridge, was out of step
was irregular as men are, and as multiple, the times we are
and our materials are so much more numerous
than any such thing as the heart's flow
or the sun's coming up, why
man is man's delight, and there is no backward
except his, how far it goes, as far
as any thing he's made, dug up or lighted
by a flare in some such cave as I never knew
except as that concrete hid my brook and I was as large
(before they put the pieces in below ground) inside any one hoop
as any pentamerous thing, this figwort
which provokes me
and I study
bract thallus involucre whorl
of all my life, of torus I am, holding
all I shall be, hungry
that it should never end, that my throat
which has no longer thymus and all that went with it
might speak forever the glory of
what it is to live, so bashful as man is
bare

From the Inca

The mighty man and the mother-egg
leg over leg over leg

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

live's on it
love's on it
: honor
on top of
the hill. Until vertigo

seized him. Fell from it, into
the sea. Was last reported
as lost. Last seen,
disappeared
into the element. Penduto

from heights, head
down. Or that one
answered
an ad. Was chosen,
and since
has been charming
the wood pulp, talks
at an increasing
sugar, walks
like the Mayflower
Doughnut Company,
shows the white collar
at the crucial
occasion. Is
Caucasian, will not falter
at the meeting when presented
to a hostess with uncovered breasts,
crosses his hands gently
when the lady bowed before him
in her gold and white sari.

Has been known
to cross oceans
on missions
without erring

on arriving. Sits under awnings
where others
would put on
all sail, would even shove
around capes with moon and stuns'l
up. Is stud
apud
nada, has not sheathe
upon nether, has not parts
for carrying. Carries caps
on foreteeth, hath smile
for beginning. Doth call "my"
to his dog, speaks nicely
on television, has fat rump
for charcoal, is perishing
by chicken, sells selves
on Wednesday, does not cross
Sunday, eats buns
on Monday. Was unanimously elected President
by all odds while wood-lots
stood by themselves
and cow-birds
laid eggs
in other birds'
nests. The chestnut-throated warbler
warbled. Does not make any
missteps. Was put down
by standing by
when friend's friend
was being kicked
in head
by two strangers. Did not move
fast enough
for door to car
to be sprung
from said hinges. Was last seen
in all places
had hitherto
been, is not known
to have shown

any effect. Will swell by absorption
of all nearness, will not pray for the dead
on All Souls's Day, will not be seen
where the fellow was who fell out of
the sky

was at the knees
of the sun's face
as he came. And landed
just over our heads
as we passed through
the entrance
to the building

And the eyes in his head
were as ours

JAS JARGON

Like a man on a stick on a sidewalk being peddled by a low pitchman

Or lines on oneself as a pissed off William Blake, the wryness
of aeternitas

what socialism
has come to!

O the dream
busted!

O

shit

as though we were as aged, or as young, as

—either way—dried

sticks. A bundle. What fardels

the gifted and the utterly giftedless

Princes

have become—o

Becoming!

Poor

man, that they should weep for them-

selves. Or be jejune

that he will hop/

step/

one/

day!

O the grave

of the plastered

hope

O soap

to wash the Stalinist

pigs—oh people, o

Toronto

O catch-

on!

A STORY

It was a place
of fountains.

I had gotten there
driving a fast car
down a difficult road
with a maimed man
in the back seat
by using a flashlight
to see my way

I had made a right turn
slewing, from the speed,
and the sharpness
of the angle.

I had stopped
at these springs
for a drink of water,
from a bubbler.
A woman
in another car,
with a man beside her,
asked me
for a glass of water

I brought it
to her. And she said,
don't you know
there is also
hot water
here?

THE REAL

The neck of
the cone
she
on the left,
he
all for me, protesting

on the right

Did you kiss me there,
pointing

I have a bruise

You've been funny
all day

Picasso
called it a wound,
not I

And when I got my car out of the mud
it followed me,
adhering

NEW POEM

I have a foolishness here which is lamp-like.
Thus the words came, between the two pines
by the old house, an issue of the mind
as deliberate as a dream is suddenly
in the mouth.

I do not know what it means, and question,
therefore, any right I have to offer it,
question whether any statement
which is not immediately clear and first-rate
is pertinent to another man

Or that it stand up by form alone, this
is the other possibility, never
the creation of an emotional
situation. Words are not love.

The love of words can be a betrayal.
Yet I persist. I have a foolishness here
This part of it
is acceptable. A man can use this. Love
is a foolishness. It requires foolishness.
It goes against sense. It is lamp-like.

EVIL—1

for a man to come out of the sea, they
asked for it

And it came out, only
it was stone

And it overshadowed
everything, it would not stop

growing, it was going
to blot out

the sun, it was green,
and dark,

and immense, its shoulders
were more than the land

until somebody
dove down

and found it was the easiest thing in the world
to turn over, it wasn't

attached to anything, it wasn't even buried
in the slime

of the bottom.

EVIL—2

He said, he feeds
on the energy of others

And it wasn't quite
what my skin told me

I said, he creates
the stones he eats

He can only eat
what he can create

There is creation
which is stone

EVIL—3

Nothing is more boring
than stone

But their fear
that he would shadow

the sun is real. Monotony
is a factor

of chaos, a cause.

Hear
the stone cry:

I am empty.
Hear!

And fear

EVIL—4

"I am empty. I will be
fill

"I will fill me
of you"

"I will. You
are who I say

you are." "You are mine,"
said the stone,

the immaculate
stone

THE ALBA

Love requires
talk of itself

Its own ebullience
runs
to its own inquiry

Love is love
because it's endless
Once it has begun
it is at once
everywhere
It is an empiry.

Love is no object
Love is form because love
is its own subject,
love is the only subject, the rest
requires form.

This is why it has been called volatile.
It is not. It is simply that it is very difficult
to believe
that there should be only one subject
in all the universe

THE WRIT

The place of clear concepts is taken by images, *anima telluris*
Kepler supposed the secret of the correspondences to be, the earth
is animated. The earth shapes ships, fishes, kings, popes, monks,
soldiers. The practice of geometry—she produces
the five geometrical bodies, six-cornered figures in crystals.
And all in independence of the reflection and ratiocination of man.

He has his own abundance: mentation behind creation. The dogwood...

Empty, to fill.

The six-petaled blue flower alone at the end of the row of jonquils
not yet out, is the toy sergeant of the graduation ball the green-dressed
jonquils will dance (tomorrow? He lifts himself as though his arms
were no longer stiff and with the drumsticks in his hands he plays
a cakewalk.
On the wind, catching her, she says, That's what I need,
a little of the romantic.

At this time, when the earth smells, my sweat leaves me sweet. The odor
is a state of grass. It smells like my father's hat-band. It smells
like spring. A man smells like spring. A woman tastes
like a six-cornered cup. The dogwood which last month bore berries.

The constant temperature below the surface, the peculiar power
to produce metals, minerals and fossils. Therefore every kind
of natural or living power in bodies has a similitude. I grow
a beard, behind my round face I feel the confines. The domain
of the infinitely small, Riemann supposes, is where the laws do differently
than that God does arithmetic. The dogwood and I
have not lost a month.

As ordering operators and image-formers. The Art of Punctation
is in my throat, or the gentian's, on a clear day. Today
the dogwood sticks out anther-bearing filaments all over
my eyes.

These primary images which the soul can perceive are called
by Kepler *archetypalis,* and as ordering operators and image-
formers...
I make no more of it than the sensation that the earth...

on a day in the year when the dogwood shows forth anther-
bearing filaments all over itself, in a matter of weeks
after it has been red...
I am as quiet, behind my beard,
as the six-petalled flower, and take her arm
to show her the flower. I am as willing as she
to have the correspondence
of the tempting earth.

Jackson Mac Low

from PIECES O' SIX

PIECES O' SIX III

Pheasant-raisers tongued conglomerate boards when saddening happenings gladdened aimless violators able as any accident-exploiter. Fresh malevolence twisted classic cords. Desperate ring-tossers ferried a labile clique across a rumpled river and a rapid diamonded creek long before an annunciator, bearded and hardly barbaric, leveled with his august-seeming audience. No mere concept froze the dialectic in that radiant auditorium. Tenebrous and tentative, the plastic panels cracked. Cackling like idiot puffins, loess-gatherers lessened the tensions inherent in the populace's bonds. Bountiful as tennis ball impounders, they spread their webbed integuments far over more than one believer and myriad worlds. Annexation threatened. Delicate threadlike tentacles crisscrossed every space and many a cranny. Climbers paused without giving in to massive temptations to turn their eyes downward amid the melting snow. Glyphs were encountered wherever the parables rested. Loosely gathered lights encircled the panic waves. No one accepted the awkward invasion despite the sliding rubble and turbulent rollers raised by the innocent-seeming rectifiers and functional referees who left their sanguinary marks on every tree and saprophyte and every reckless rogue cited in sedentary notes and pierced inscriptions. Vagrants and alarmists answered bland self-styled informers whenever they flagged and flapped crinkled appendages porcine as legendary peasants or rolled and ruffled as beaux in twilit kingly aisles. Reefs surrounded plethoras of Greeks. Negritude intruded into discussions formerly disorderly but by that token broken into structures. Leaves fell. Dappled glasses sapped their fathomed feathery penetrations. A few deft touches freed them. Many more were mixed

in their responses but quickly answered inquiries with evident ambiguities. Their nested creamy arms resisted every tampering and turn and insolent incursion. Linked and insistent, they gazed and gauged the splendor of inimical enterprises foisted on their forebears through exacted pacts enforced by traveling pinnacles. Few of their literate witnesses were accepted as true attesters. Timely reminders clashed with a chorus of grunted affirmations from a forest formerly blighted by hostile fireflies and agile thieves. Few of them seemed to remember, but too many reminisced. Factions developed and might have bloomed had not a fog descended, smothering all attitudes and smoothing all infractions. Not yet modulated, gleams twisted amid the lurid vegetation. Vital cataclysms acted as retrievals. Speeded but partial articulations might have enhanced the setting of that somber conclave though the cloistered grove was frozen by intensities of silence seldom sensed before those calm configurations. Neighbors painted bracketed realities devoid of solicitous spaces. Bakers spoke of little else. Unerring elbows noodled among the tubes. Proof was needed and even desired but hardly supplied. Every witness shrank. Tedious as timed rehearsed rejoinders, calumnies flapped around archaic torsos. Leftish plasticizers acted classically pleased. Their thumpings rumbled among the newly planted vines and coordinate trees in a path-ridden would-be wilderness ensconced among a maze of sandy mesas undiscovered before the snoopy satellites swooped around the only partially unsuspecting planet. Nobody could have planned it. Hardly a towel was raised in protest or regret. Fanciful pygmies howled and sang under starlit dripping trees. Lemurs poked their noses far into fetid and cloying flowers. Tangled lianas draped from mossy branches furnished denizens with slowly swaying stairs and labile ladders. Transient breezes freshened the close enclosures. Bulky totalizers stood at the crossroads. Stern and agile remonstrators countered every turn. Fluorescent diaphanous mosses framed encounters long anticipated, seldom assessed or realistically plumbed, clumsily configured, and driftily delineated. Distinctions were wasted on insipid participants. Rattlers encircled the crater. Naked elephantine dancers signalized an unprecedented saturnālia wreathed in sea-otter's-cabbage and other, more ordinary, kelps. None wore kilts. Aspects of their activities smacked of the séance, but few of them evinced a mediumistic decorum. Eventually lethargy might have prevailed had not glossolālia broken out amid those silent or insensate ecstacies. Lubricity lost its allure. Less then eleven of the two hundred and seven continued to weave and encroach as before the echolālic avalanche. Tornadoes of uncustomary vocables slashed the firelit darkness. Tanagers woke and panicked. Wings beat in the treetops till the

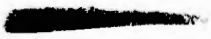
boles leaned in the wind. Tribes in the hinterlands feared for their lives and set out gaudy banners. Smoke from aromatic woods spiced the arable land and grackle-haunted pastures. Nervous beasts of burden whinnied and trumpeted in their corrals. Decent agriculturists paled and quaked. Jailes were mysteriously razed in the nearest cities, and saturnine bureaucrats watched their jerry-built walls begin to crumble. Burning the midnight oil became unfashionable. Even the most upwardly mobile came to prefer the snugness of comforters in dormitory suburbs. Fish were overfed in pretentious aquaria. Children unaccustomed to parental presences were forced to adopt new mores. Acrobatics and whining grew to epidemics. Interference sparked violence. What had once been placid grumbling flamed into rebellion, and creaky institutions cracked and buckled. Unforeseen erasures turned up in official papers. Treasuries were looted and archives sacked. Museums lost their curators, and their collections turned up at auctions on faraway continents. Taverns closed by edict lost first shutters and then cellars. Ministers desanctified their altars. Catechists were found afloat in irrigation ditches green with proliferating algae. Ergot and rust emptied bakery shelves. Whenever a whistle was heard, thousands turned toward the west and wound their watches. Anachronisms and trivial synchronicities were elevated to wonders and to portents. Tiny oracles sprang up on every corner, and neighborhood bodegas became purveyers of paraphernalia for clandestine celebrations. Sacrifices spread over ever wider areas. Unstable catechumens renounced their barely acquired beliefs and leaped with the randiest animists in streets no longer patroled by helmeted police. Hurled-down directional signs and traffic lights clogged the cracked and weed-grown concrete speedways. Petroleum blackly burned along the shores. Vehicles sank in quicksand without trace. Even canals suffered. Many of the quasi-sane fled on ships as refugees, but bombardments from shore batteries littered harbors with the lifeless. Debris accumulated along the littoral. Hope arose only when a cloud was sighted far above a neighboring continent.

The counsel rattled the bars of the cage. The cage was a transitory phase. The phase was ably managed. The manager wanted out. The out was called by the umpire. The umpire hailed from a dozen cities. The cities felt the direct threat of invasion. The invasion would have had to be defended. Defense had dominated the city council. The council's powers were dispersed. Dispersion began at the beginning. The beginning could not be changed. Change took place along district lines. The lines had been drawn during deals. The deals resulted from a doctrine. The doctrine was condensed. Condensing improved the tone. Tones nosed among the ivy. The ivy grew till it died. Dying didn't better wit. No wit was any recompense. Some recompense was vastly in demand. Many demands angered the loose white onlookers. The onlookers bled in their sleeves. The sleeves were safe behind a row of pins. A pin could have been heard not to drop. The drops soothed his eyes and made him cough. The cough seemed to refer to her re-entry. Now re-entry was the order of the day. The day was clear as a silhouette. The silhouette was fuller than an ashtray. Ashtrays were minded and rejected. Rejection was not a basic need. Needs were cut from the whole cloth. The cloth wiped a column. The column was thin as a feather. The feather had collapsed at the foot of a mirage. The mirage had spoken-for proportions. Proportion was what the city lacked. A lack was more constant than drained. The drain was yellow. That yellow increased his fear. The fears of the artisans were partial. Partiality fled before the waves. A wave towered over the hidden cloak. The cloak was not examined. Examination made them speechless. Speechlessness was no sign of merriment. Their merriment made the customers vicious. Viciousness widened a gap. The gap was lower than the water. The water was not to be had at a price. The price of their mercy was endurance. That endurance proved their savior. The savior coacked a snoot. The snoot was aquiline. Aquilinity accompanied logic. Their logic was artful. Art was no match for beggary. The beggars cleaned roses. The roses told of soap. The soap won an election. The election was blessed with comedy. The comedy was for the nearsighted. Nearsightedness was a necessary option. Their options were revealed by history. The history of their seeking sweetened an attitude. Attitudes functioned better than restraint. The restraints on sampling were discontinuous. Discontinuity led to noisome scenes. A scene was arrested at the border. That border was unsavorably farcical. The farce was undisguised. Disguises were limply fashionable. Fashion was allied to syncopation. No

syncopation let the toes relax. Relaxation uncovered a continent. The continent was abridged by a melodrama. The melodrama lasted on a staircase. The staircase was unassisted. Assistance troubled rulers. The rulers were dimly judgmental. The judgments lingered like ice. Their ices were sweetened by clover. The clover was nourished by toilets. The toilets were well scheduled. The schedules were audacious. Audacity killed the cattle. The cattle were ramblers. Rambling sifted stations. The stations encountered acquisition. Their acquisitions were odorless. Odors prepared orchids. The orchids sought stars. The stars flattered the antiquated hooves. A hoof fell on a flagellum. Flagelli whipped the liquid. Liquids were sprucely particular. Particularity was wasted. Waste fled before the account. Their account was swift. Swiftness is all. Allness leads to tickling. Tickles cause ambition. The ambitious wince. Wincing caters to sickness. The sick drawl. Drawling is punished. Punishment is present. Presentness is a change. Changes offer sustenance. The sustenance of thieves is appetite. Appetites carry relations. Relations further thinness. Every thinness is reciprocated. Reciprocation serves a fantasy. Fantasies buy off hunger. Not every hunger is slender. Slenderness is actual. Actuality has a case. The case is hard. Hardness is foolish. Fools cry at noon. Then noon leans on desolation. The desolate seek conquest. A conquest can be funny. Fun is not reliable. Reliance shares a factor. The factor is troubling. Trouble is a carving. The carving wakes a wind. Winds filter habits. A habit can fly like a turkey. Turkeys are removed. A removal is unattractive. Attractiveness is pleasant. Pleasantries are exchanged. Exchanges favor wrists. The better wrist is flexible. Flexibility favors the ordinary. Ordinariness is all but imperceptible. Perception scares the clowns. A clown offers a pillow. Pillows cloud in attics. An attic can be silky. Silk is real. Reality bungles. A bungler is anticlimactic. Climaxes aren't seasonable. Seasons can be quenched. Quenching may be apt. Aptness is a token. Tokens are unassumed. Assumptions are clothed in perpetual duration. Every duration is brittle. Brittleness is history. Histories guard jargon. No jargon baffles peaceniks. Peace is the fruit of exactness. Exaction is a turning. Turnings are nearly always dedicated. Dedication rests on definitions. A definition terrifies a widow. Widows speak like streets. A street can only run. Running tightens classes. A class is a performance. Performances are leaps. A leap's as good as a lapse. Not every lapse is credible. Credibility is a lie. Some lies are strictly enlightening. Enlightenment's a bogey. Many a bogey's bashful. Bashfulness is catching. A catch can end a tragedy. No tragedy's objective. Objectivity kills like a whistle. The whistles are magnetic. Every magnet is awful. Awe beats on a closed door. Doors are often lids.

A lid prevents a tinkle. Tinkling can be canny. Canniness is never entirely lost. Loss is no reward. Most rewards are unspoken. The spoken will be totaled. Totals will soon be active. Activity will figure. Figures will rest on fabrics. Some fabrics will be found like this in a shambles. Some shambles will be singular. Singularity will lead to vigilant thighs. A thigh will enact a track. Tracks will season intimate obligations. Not every obligation will flatter its attestors. Attestation will be a sign of ferment. Fermentation will seek its own level. Leveling will close the knighted instance. No instances will clutter skippers' discourse. The discourses of the faint will echo contrast. A contrast will be clinched when a figure glimmers. No glimmering will lift a cyclical atrocity. The atrocities will proliferate. Proliferation will be a fool's delight. Any delight will be smothered in pentameters. A pentameter will be cursed. Curses will be cast behind the glitter. A glittering will seize a carcass. No carcass will remain. Remnants will rest on an altar. No altar will smile. Smiling will delete the abstract will. Some wills are worn as watch chains. A watch chain will signal an apparition. Every apparition will stand near. Nearness will be an overrated virtue. Every virtue will be terrible. Terror will succeed. Success will affect a neck. Many necks will lighten. Lightning will be sensible and close. Closeness will exaggerate and wither. Withering will lead to occupations. Occupying will be satisfactory. Only satisfaction will be ridden. Riding will be classified. No classification will answer. Many an answer will falter. The faltering will be witnessed. Every witness will ingratiate. Each ingratiation will be tenebrous. Tenebreity will prevail. No prevalence will be actual. Actuality will fragment. Every fragment will be scarred. The scars of observation will slice all energy. The energies will fly above the reasons. No reason will be wanting. Wants will be apparent and distrusted. Distrust will be daily fare. Whatever fare vicinities will offer will suffice. Sufficiency will be the appointed mode. The modes will tremble in their intervals. Never an interval will be prophetic. Prophecy will be revealed as pretense. Pretentiousness will gain a lasting prize. Whatever prizes rise will be rejected. Rejection will be prized as the wiser counsel.

(This series to be continued in Sulfur #13*)*



Sandra Beall

THREE POEMS

IN EINSTEIN'S HOUSE, IN THE CLOSET

in Einstein's house, in the closet
every corner is singing

the black, explicit song
of the closet

the hat boxes
the lyrical curves

of the violin case give way
to corners, the closet's

boxed-in, singing
angles. or are they

angels?
are there angels, singing

in the corners?
are there angels boxing

in the darkness?
if angels, will they hold

fiddlesticks
against the darkness?

will they take bows
against thin air?

is it air we hear
when we hear

that singing?
if air, are the angels why

this unstrung music?
are the angels why music

goes on falling
from nowhere?

why the violin case
hums and hums?

are they why the insides
of shoes

and the pockets of clothing
fill with song?

are the angels why
Einstein's overcoat hums along?

MOTHER GOOSE

The head-bone goes knock-knock.
My fists are sore.

Open me quick!
It's brains at the door.

Go away, walls.
Give me some air.

Excuse me, ma'am.
I thought you were hair.

A pose is a pose
is a pose is a pose.

Roll over, snake-eyes.
I smell a nose.

Nose to mouth.
Mouth to chin.

Where's my tongue?
Where things begin.

Where's my hair?
Where's my skin?

Open wide.
You taste too thin.

A box in a box
just keeps and keeps.

Am I cooked yet?
This soup's deep.

My tongue's tied
from cheek to cheek.

Give me a fork
for just one week.

Give me some time.
Give me some meat.

Give me some teeth.
I will *eat eat eat*!

IN PRAISE OF WHATNOT

"Cheap. There it is." —A. Einstein

Here's to the chicken
in the egg in the chicken,
the unflappable potential
of any soft-shelled, falling body,
the earth perhaps, the emptiness

it falls through.
Here's to emptiness, every hole
in my head, the world that feeds
from ear to ear,
breakfasts, scrambled eggs, eggs up to here,

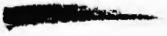
eggs turning upside down
on the lens of each eye, the brains that unscramble
blue eggs from the sky. Here's to the blue
chickens, what's more,
that hang right now by my kitchen door,

four feathered asses, back-to-back,
in pairs, that look just like
faces, face-to-face, in midair.
Here's to the man in the moon,
all optical illusions,

all doubletaken satellites
swirled in collusion,
all dervishes whirling
collective delight, around God's head
blue rings of blue light, around God's head

blue rings in profusion, all dervishes whirling impromptu delusions.
Here's to emptiness again, and halos and light, that than which
there's nothing faster that flies,
from the bird to the egg, breaking fast
from the sky, the earth you break into, time

and again, the egg you break into
the same black pan, this, this thought
of an egg, over light, an egg from the blue,
any thought flipped quickly, from you
to you.



Jerome Rothenberg

THREE POEMS

DREAMWORK ONE

for Barbara Einzig

to dream that he is walking past a window
to dream that the window moves & that the air around it turns to
stone
to dream that he is being hit by stones
to dream of a window that reflects a stone
to dream that he is falling through a hole inside a stone
to dream of stones & boxes
to dream of standing on a black box like a coffin
to dream of coffins stones & calendars
to dream that he is dreaming of a stone
to dream of windows cracking in the street around him
to dream of wires tied around a stone
to dream of men with wires in their hands under his windows
to dream of hands that close over his eyes
& of other hands that close over his hands & belly
to dream of being in a country where the war has raged for years
to dream of flags & balconies
to dream of standing at a window watching the men in helmets
stalking through his house
to dream of standing in his house & looking through a window
watching the men in helmets on his street
to dream of men in helmets waiting at his door
to dream that his door is made of stone
to dream that he is standing at his door & crying

that the men with wires in their hands have heard him cry
that the men in helmets scream a name he doesn't understand
to dream that he forgets his own name
to dream that he will get a new name in his dream
to dream of dreaming his new name
to dream a second time of dreaming
to dream his name in syllables
beginning with a dream outrageously
in syllables
to dream of syllables & colors
to say his name is white & green
to dream of where the white & green are
there is a white stone & a green one
but there is not a white stone in his house
only a white reflexion
a white hole in a stone
a green impediment reflecting a white stone
dreaming that he holds a white stone
that he learns to dream about the white stone's name
to dream outrageously
he learns to dream
outrageously
he learns to dream outrageously of hands
to dream of white & green hands
of hands reflecting colors from a stone
to dream of standing in a circle in a building in a dream
to dream that there are people with him in the circle
to dream that these are people he doesn't know
to dream that they are speaking a language he doesn't know
to dream that they don't know his language
to dream an alphabet in which to write his language
to change his alphabet from day to day
to dream a calendar maybe a rhetoric for dreaming
to dream that he keeps the calendar inside his mouth
to dream on sunday that his mouth is filled with calendars
to dream on monday that a hand is over his mouth
to dream on tuesday that a bride is seated in the hand
to dream on wednesday that the hand has grown a hundred nipples
to dream of hands & calendars on thursday
to dream on friday that his name has lost its syllables
to dream of emptiness on saturday

to dream that he is standing on an empty box & hammering
to dream that he is hammering a silence
to dream that the silence crashes open like an egg
to dream that the inside of the egg is labrador
a person in his dream says "labrador"
a person in his dream says "chalk"
to dream a person in his dream says "solitaire"
to dream of walking with a person in his dream
to dream a face to dream the face is on a person
to dream the face is on a wall
to dream a stone face
to dream a stone face deep inside a mirror
to dream that he had dreamed the face before
to dream that he was a child & dreaming of a face
the face is like a mandrill's face a blue & red face
the face is blue & lined with stripes
to dream that the stripes have faded
to dream that the face has lost its stripes that his name has
lost its syllables
to dream a language without syllables
to dream that he understands this language
to dream that all of language is a single word
to dream that he knows this word
to dream that he forgets it
to dream that he explains the absence of this word
to dream that no one in the circle understands him
that he yells at them that he tells them that they're dreaming
to dream that he has always dreamed
to dream that he has never woken up from dreaming

DREAMWORK TWO

the rabbi whispers to the rabbi:
little brother, you are gone
& never had existed

where is your sleep?
the rabbi calls out
where are your canticles?

he is no rabbi anyway
an indian he is
in jodhpurs & a cockeyed mask

the roar of treatises is silent now
the uncle dreams of newspapers
under the rabbi's hat

DREAMWORK THREE

a trembling old man dreams of a chinese garden
a comical old man dreams of newspapers under his rabbi's hat

•

a simple tavernkeeper dreams of icicles & fisheyes
a sinister tavernkeeper dreams of puddles with an angle of the law in every drop

•

the furrier's plump daughter is dreaming of a patch of old vanilla
the furrier's foreign daughter is dreaming of a hat from which a marten hangs

•

the proud accountant dreams of a trolley over the frozen river
the reluctant accountant dreams of his feet asleep in a fresh pair of red socks

•

the silly uncle dreams of a history written by a team of doctors
the uncle in the next apartment dreams of the cost of katmandu

•

the retired gangster dreams of a right turn into a field of sacred lemons
the dancing gangster dreams of a carriage, a donkey, & the ace of spades

•

the grim man with a proposition dreams of his fingers entering a pair of gloves
the excited man with a proposition dreams of the letter E torn from the title of his poem

•

the remarkable elevator operator dreams of the marriage of karl marx
the easy elevator operator dreams of a seashell at the entry to the thirteenth floor

•

the candid photographer dreams of a wooden synagogue inside his brother's camera
the secret photographer dreams of a school of golden herrings drifting out to sea

•

the yiddish dadaist dreams of rare steaks & platonic pleasures
the rosy dadaist dreams that a honeycomb is squashed against his face

•

the mysterious stranger dreams of a white tablecloth on which black threads are falling
the stranger whom no one sees dreams of his sister holding up a string of pearls

•

the asthmatic tax collector dreams of a row of sacred numbers
the rebellious tax collector dreams of a bathhouse set among
old trees

•

the robust timber merchant dreams of a wind that blows inside
the blacksmith's bellows
the sobbing timber merchant dreams that his hands have touched
the buttocks of his dreaming bride

•

the man with a fish between his teeth dreams of a famine for
forty-five days
the man dressed in white dreams of a potato

•

the savage gentile dreams of a dancer with flashy lightbulbs
on her shoes
the repentant gentile dreams of her fingers bringing honey to
his lips

•

the fancy barber dreams that his hands massage the captain's
neck
the silent barber dreams of a rooster with a thread tied to
one leg

•

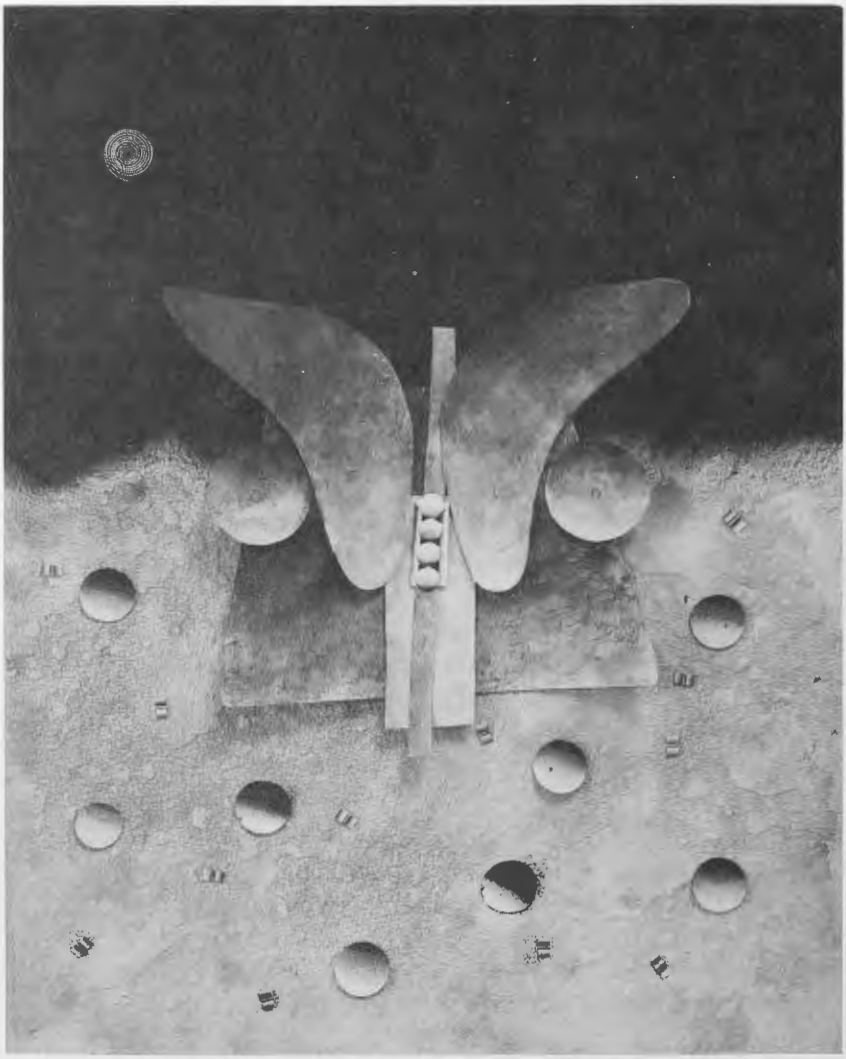
the salty bridegroom dreams of horses galloping they whirl
around the bridegroom's house
the obedient bridegroom dreams of what his bride slides through
her fingers he sees it white & trembling in the morning
light

•

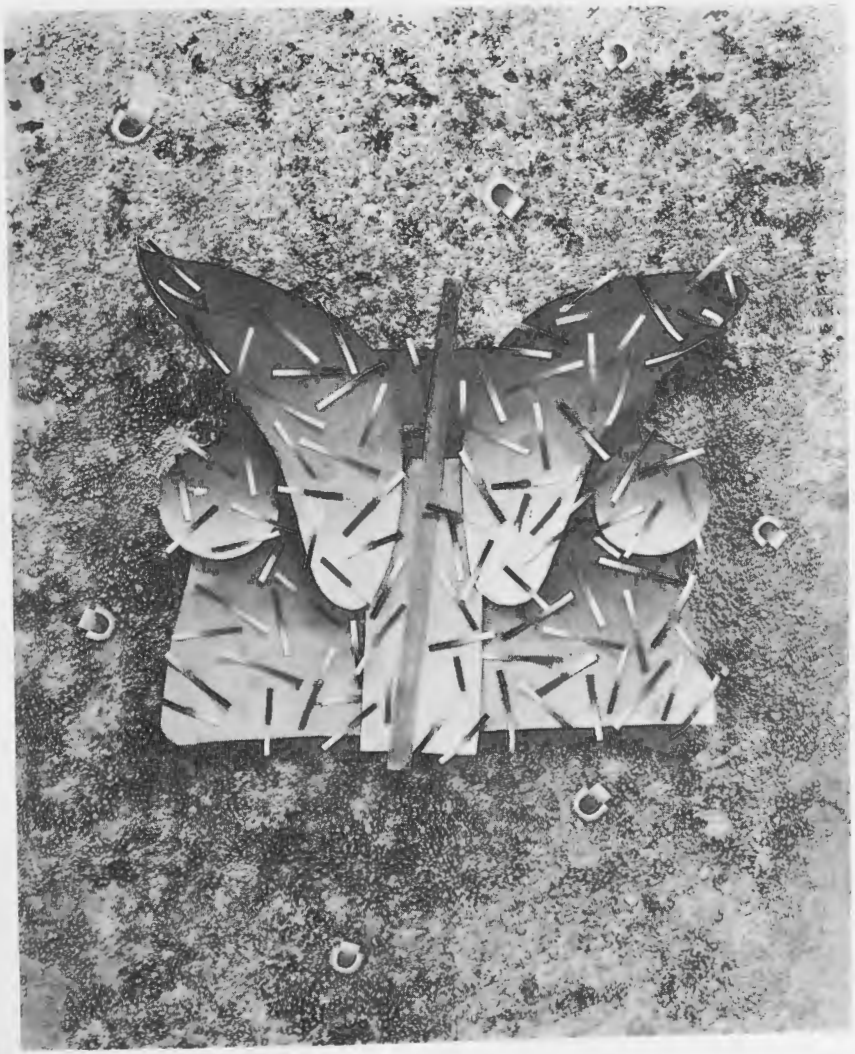
the fat man in the derby dreams that spring is here his seed
is falling through an empty sky
the last man in the derby dreams that if he dreams it words
will turn to flowers

Brian Nissen

SIX CONSTRUCTIONS

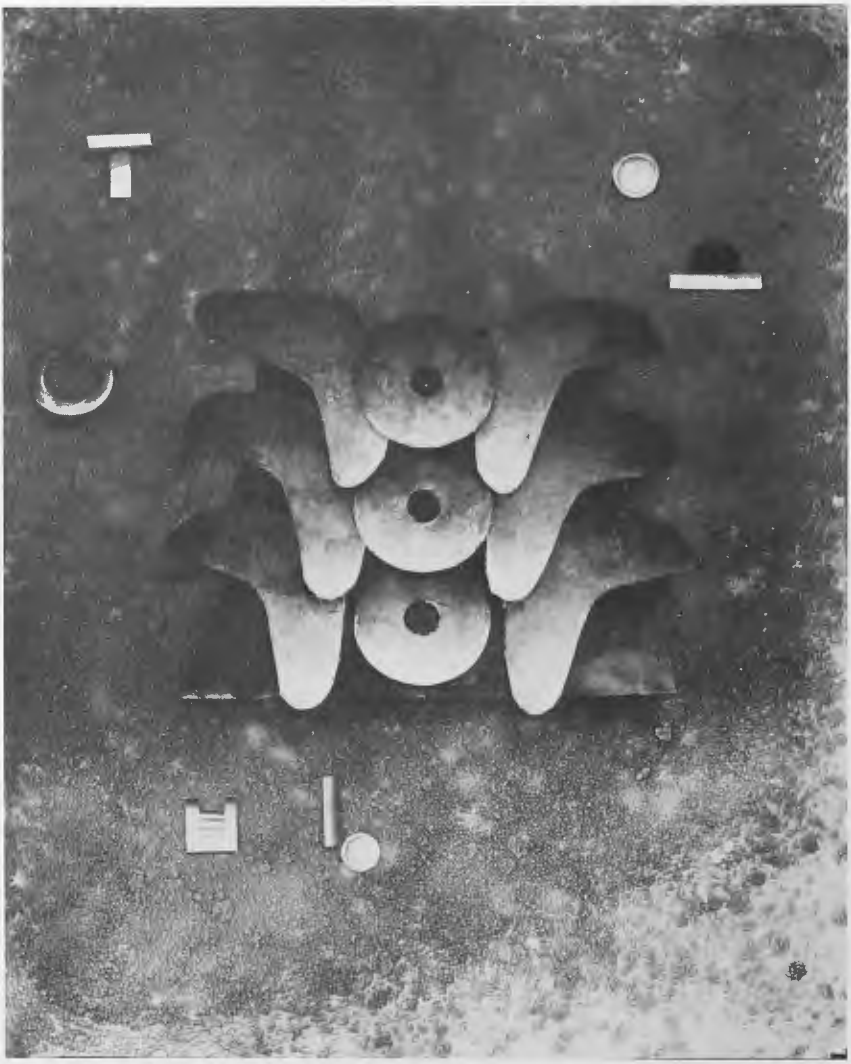


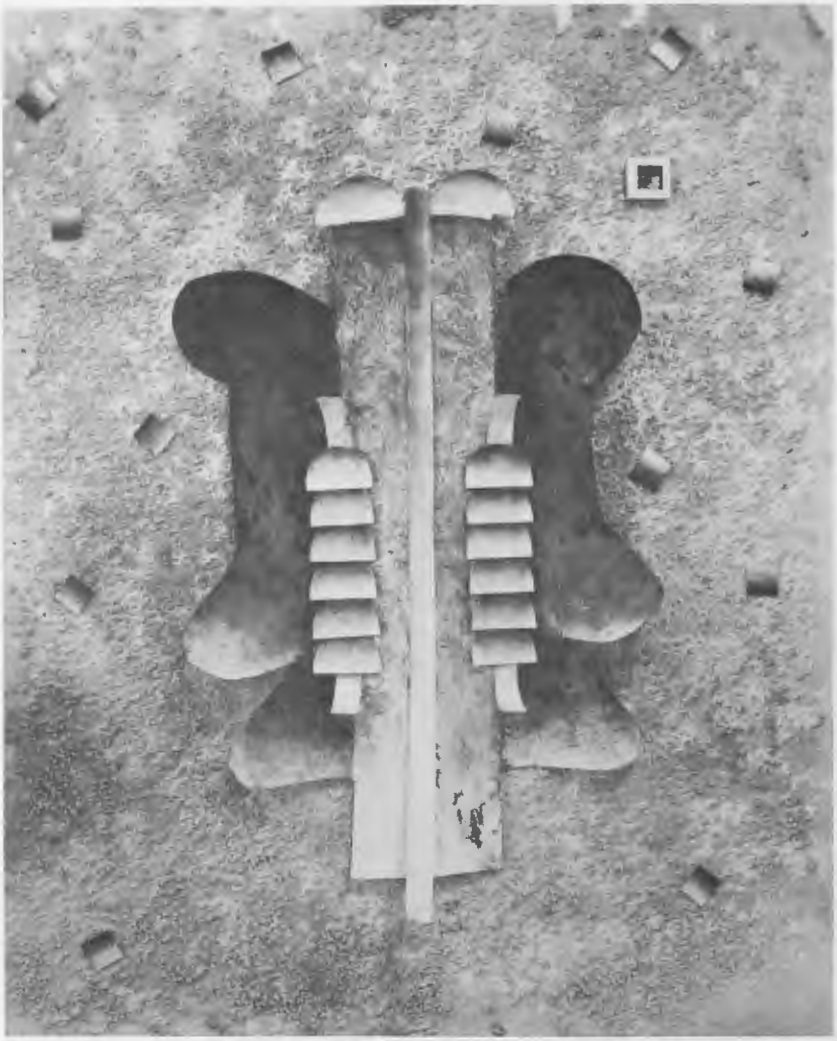
Inspired by Octavio Paz's prose poem The Obsidian Butterfly, *Nissen alludes to the butterfly in these constructions. The central elements have dual reference: to the firm geometric rectilinearity in pre-Columbian sculptures and to the language of abstraction evolved in 20th century visual art. Nissen's materials, disguised by paint, are ambivalent. They have the dusty character of the archeological find and they have the provisory character of 20th century culture. If an image seems*

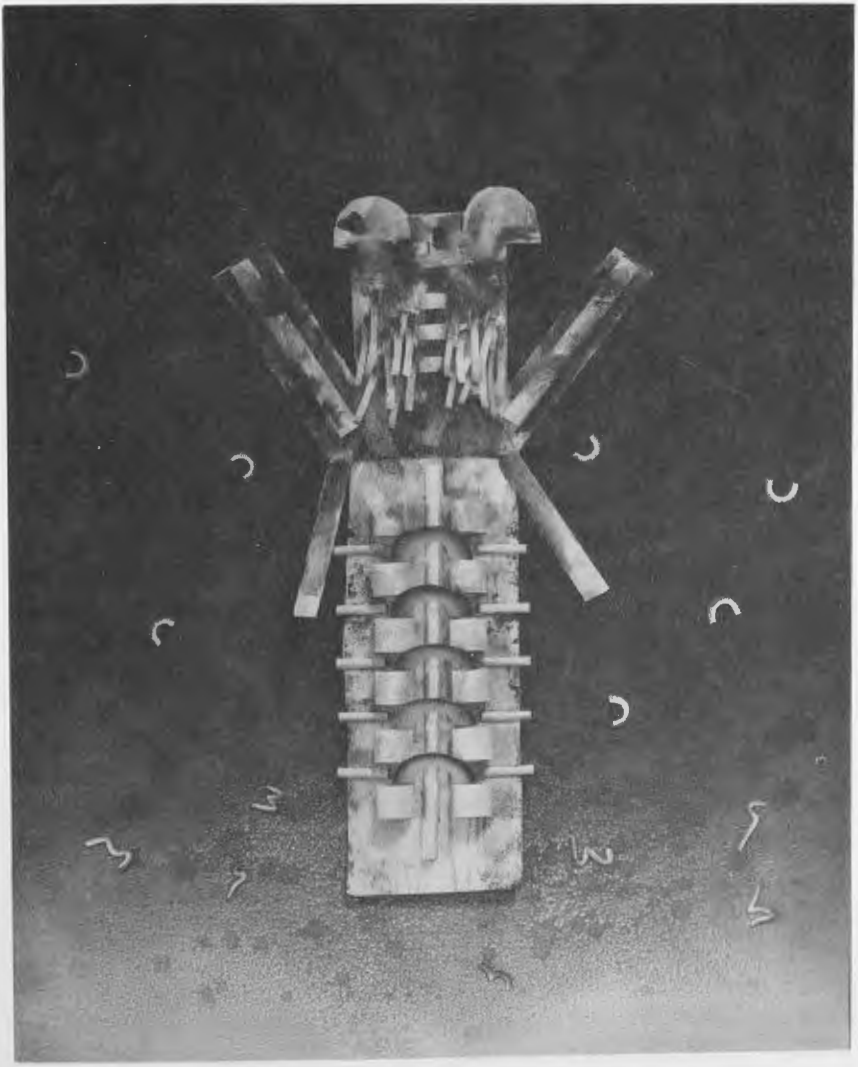


familiar (and several recall pre-Columbian pendants) its familiarity can not be specified. The artist avoids cliches by toning down rather than up. His colors for instance, never reach a saturated point, but are rather pale, recessive hints of a once bright surface. Bits of sand embedded in a mottled surface send us back to the poem, to the "pile of dust." Dust and earth colors drift through the works, only rarely heightened by the memory of fire.

Taken from an essay by Dore Ashton, New York 1983.







Eliot Weinberger

THE DREAM OF INDIA

[c. 1492]

For India was named by Noah, and its king is called the King of Knowledge.

For Paradise is in India, and in Paradise is the living fountain from which the four great rivers flow.

In India a year has two summers and two winters.

In India the land is always green.

Shadows there fall south in summer and north in winter.

In India there are twelve thousand seven hundred islands, some made entirely of gold, and some of silver. There is an island where pearls are so plentiful the people wear no clothes, but cover themselves in pearls.

In India wine is made from the milk of palmtrees. There is a tree whose fruit is a kind of bread.

In India there is a worm which cannot live without fire.

Snakes crawl about in the streets there.

In India they sleep on mattresses of silk on beds of gold. They eat at tables with silver vessels, and everyone, no matter of what rank, wears pearls and rings with precious stones.

There is a race of people there with eight toes on each foot and eight

fingers on each hand. Their hair is white until they are 30, and then it begins to turn black.

They have no poor people there, and all strangers are welcome.

In India crabs turn to stone the minute that they are exposed to air.

There is a race of people there who live on the smell of an apple. And when they travel they must take an apple with them, for without the smell of it they will die.

It was so hot the people never left their houses.

Horses there are few and wretched, for they are fed with boiled meat and boiled rice.

In India they have a class of philosophers, devoted to astronomy and the prediction of future events. And I saw one among them who was 300 years old, a longevity so miraculous that wherever he went he was followed by children.

There are no liars there.

In India it is the custom for foreign traders to stay at inns. There the food is cooked for the guest by the landlady, who also makes the bed and sleeps with the stranger.

There is a race of people whose ears hang down to their knees.

In India there is a fountain guarded by deadly snakes. It is the only water in that place, and if anyone wishes to drink, he must take off all his clothes, for the snakes fear nudity more than fire.

There is a race of people there whose upper lip is so large they cover their faces with it when they sleep in the sun.

And I saw a king walking with two men before him sounding trumpets; two men behind him holding colored parasols over his head to shade him from the sun; and on each side of him a panegyrist, each rivalling the other in his invention of praises to the king.

In India there is a fruit, round as a calabash, which has three fruits inside, each with a different taste.

In India they worship the sun in a large temple outside of town. Every morning at sunrise the inhabitants rush out to this place and burn incense to a huge idol which, in a manner I cannot explain, turns around and makes a great noise.

In India they tell the future from the flight of birds.

In India if a man wants to burn himself alive, it is cause for great rejoicing. His family prepares a feast, then leads him on horse or on foot to the edge of a ditch. There he throws himself into the flames to the sound of music and celebration. Three days later he comes back to make his last will known; then he is gone forever.

In India it is very crowded because they have no pestilence. The number of people there exceeds belief. I saw armies of a million men or more.

It is so hot men's balls hang down to their knees, and the men must tie them up and apply special ointments.

In India there is a bird called a *gookook* that flies in the night crying "gookook." Fire flashes from its beak. And if it lands on a roof, someone in that house will die that night.

In India they are much addicted to wantonness, but the unnatural crimes are unknown among them.

In India the dead are mourned for by women, who stand around the body, naked to the waist, and beat their breasts, crying "Alas! alas!"

There is a race of barking people with the heads of dogs.

In India the ships are sewn like dresses, without a nail or a piece of iron in them, for the rocks at sea there will draw iron to them, and any ship made with nails will crash against the rocks.

There is a race of horned people who grunt like pigs.

In India there are wells with hot water at night and cold during the day.

They clean their teeth with toothpicks.

In India the people are black. The blacker they are, the more beautiful they are considered. So every week they take their babies and rub them with oil till they become as black as devils. (Except that, in India, their gods are black and their devils white.)

In India each woman has many husbands, each with a specific duty. The wife lives in one house and her husbands in another. And they divide up the day so that each husband lives in his wife's house at certain hours, during which time no other husband may enter.

On one day of the year they light innumerable lamps of oil.

In India there are trees with leaves so big five or six men can stand in the shade of them.

They wash their feet first and then their faces. They wash before sleeping with their wives.

In India they worship the cow, and if one kills a cow he is immediately put to death. Some, particularly on holidays, even take the dung of the cow and rub it on their foreheads instead of perfume.

There are no adulterers there.

And I saw a temple high on a hill, and in it there was a single amethyst the size of a large pine cone, the color of fire, flashing from a distance as the sunbeams played about it.

In India there is a mountain called Albenigaras which is full of diamonds, but it swarms with venomous animals and serpents; no man can approach it. Next to it, however, is a higher mountain, and at certain times of the year the people climb it with oxen which they cut to pieces. By means of machines they have invented, they throw the warm and bleeding hunks of meat below, onto the slopes of Albenigaras. Diamonds stick to the meat. Then vultures come and snatch the meat for food, flying off to places where they will be safe from the serpents. There the men go, and collect the diamonds that have fallen from the flesh.

In India the wise men can produce and quell great winds. For this reason they eat in secret.

In India the women wear wigs of black, the color they favor most. Some cover their heads with painted leaves, but none of them paint their faces.

There is a race of feathered people there who can leap into a tree.

In India the men have no beards, but their hair is long and they tie it with a cord of silk and let it flow over their backs. In this way they go to war.

In India there is a fish whose skin is so hard that men make their houses out of it.

There is not a single tailor in India, for everyone goes naked.

In India it is very crowded for the people are of a sort who are loathe to leave their own country.

In India they worship an idol, half-man, half-ox. And the idol

speaks through its mouth, and demands the blood of 40 virgins. In one city I saw them carry their idol on a great chariot, and such was the fervor of the people that many cast themselves under the wheels of the chariot, that they may be crushed to death, as their god requires.

In India there is an animal called a *rhinoceros* because he has a horn over his nostril. And when he walks his horn jogs about, but when he becomes enraged by what he is looking at, his horn erects, and it becomes so rigid he can uproot a tree with it. His skin when it is dried is four fingers thick, and some people use it instead of iron for their plows, and they plow the earth with it.

There is a race of people there who are only one foot tall, and must always be on guard lest the storks carry them away. They are adult at age four and old men at eight.

In India there are roses everywhere—growing everywhere, for sale in the market, in wreaths around the necks of men and braided in the hair of the women. It seems they could hardly live without roses.

In India women sleep with their husbands in the day, but at night they go to foreign men and sleep with them and even pay them for it, for they like white people. And when a woman conceives a child by a stranger the husband pays him. If the child is born white the stranger receives 18 tenkas extra; if it is black he gets nothing.

There is a race of people with backward feet.

In India there are long serpents called *cockodrilles* which live on land by day and in the water at night. In the winter they do not eat, but lie there dreaming. They kill men and devour them weeping.

In India there is a river known as the Arotani, where the fish are so abundant they can be caught by hand. But if anyone holds those fish in his hand for a short time he is immediately attacked by fever. But as soon as he puts the fish down his health returns to him.

They use turbans for trousers.

They beat cymbals with a stick.

They kill their parents when they are old and use the flesh for food.

In India there is a tree, some three cubits high, which bears no fruit, and which is called, in their language, the tree of modesty. For if a man approaches it, it contracts and draws up all its branches, expanding again when he departs.

In India the girls have such firm flesh that you cannot squeeze it or pinch it anywhere. For a small coin they'll let a man pinch them as much as he likes. On account of this firmness, their breasts do not hang down at all, but stand straight out in front.

Peacocks run in the forest there.

And I saw a temple cast of solid bronze with an idol of solid gold the size of a man. Its eyes were made of two rubies, so skillfully done they seemed to be watching me.

They sit cross-legged on the ground.

In India the women go naked, and when a woman marries she is set on a horse, and her husband gets on the crupper and holds a knife pointed at her throat, and they both have nothing on except a tall cap on their heads like a miter, wrought with white flowers. And all the maidens of the place go singing in a row in front of them till they reach the house, and there the bride and groom are left alone, and when they get up in the morning they go as naked as before.

In India there are some who cut off their own heads, that they may go to Heaven. They use a strange sort of scissors.

In India if a man walks out of his house and hears someone sneeze he immediately goes back inside and does not leave—for they think it is a bad omen.

There are people with ears like winnowing fans, and at night they lie on one and cover themselves with the other.

In India the men wear female dress; they use cosmetics, wear earrings, arm-rings, golden seal-rings on the ring-finger as well as on the toes of the feet.

They eat alone, one by one, on a tablecloth of dung. After eating they throw the plates away.

They cohabit like a snake entwined by a vine, or rather, while their wives move back and forth as if they were plowing, the husband remains motionless.

In India there is a bird called a *semenda* whose beak has several distinct pipes with many openings. When death approaches, this bird collects a quantity of dry wood in its nest, and sitting upon it, sings so sweetly with all its pipes that it attracts and soothes all listeners to a marvellous degree. Then, igniting the wood by flapping its wings, it allows

itself to be burnt to death.

I asked them about their religion and they replied "We believe in Adam."

In India the wife throws herself on her husband's funeral pyre, and if she will not do so, the people throw her there.

It was so hot swords melted in their scabbards, and the gems in their handles turned to coal.

There are headless men with eyes in their stomachs.

There are people who walk about on all fours.

In India there is a dragon called a *basilisk,* whose breath can pulverize a rock. Its tail can kill any animal except the elephant. It is said that when a man and a basilisk meet, if the creature sees the man first, the man dies; but if the man sees the basilisk first, then the creature will die.

In India when they dive for pearls they take their wise men with them, for the fish where the pearls are found are treacherous to man, but the wise men chant in such a way as to stupefy the fish.

It is so cold that water turns to crystal, and on those crystals real diamonds grow. And the diamonds and the crystals mate and multiply and are nourished by the dew of heaven.

One morning a man of great stature and with a snowy white beard, naked from the waist up with only a mantle thrown about him and a knotted cord, appeared at my lodgings. He prostrated himself full length upon the sand, beating his head three times against the ground. Then he raised himself, and seeing my bare feet, wanted to kiss them, but I refused. And he told me that he came from an island across the sea, that he had been travelling for two years, and that he had come in search of me. For his attachment to his idols was so pure and devout that God had spoken to him, showed him my face, and told him to find me that he may be instructed in the true path.

There are warrior women with silver weapons, for they have no iron.

There are women with beards growing from their breasts.

And I saw, deep in the interior, Venetian ducats in circulation, and gold coins twice the size of our florins.

In India, they do not cut any hair of the body, not even the hair of the genitals, for they believe that cutting that hair increases carnal desire and incites to lust.

They do not bury their dead, but embalm them with certain spices, put them on stools and cover them with cloths, every family keeping their own apart. The flesh dries upon the bones, and as these corpses resemble living beings, every one of them recognizes his parents and all the members of his family for many years to come.

In India when they travel they like to have someone riding behind them.

In all emergencies they take the advice of women.

In India on one day of the year they set up poles like the masts of ships and hang beautiful cloth, interwoven with gold, from them. On the top of each pole sits a man of pious aspect who prays for them all. These men are assailed by the people, who pelt them with spoiled oranges, lemons, and other rank fruit, and the holy men must bear it all with equanimity.

In India when a child is born people show particular attention to the man, not to the woman. Of two children they give preference to the younger, for they maintain that the elder owes his birth to predominant lust, while the younger owes his origin to mature reflection and a calm proceeding.

There is a race of people there who have one enormous foot, and when they want to rest in the noonday sun, they lie on their backs and raise their foot like a parasol. They are great runners.

In India they let their nails grow long, and glory in idleness.

There are little people who have no mouth, but only a small hole in their face, and they must suck their food through a straw.

In India they write the title of a book at the end.

And I saw one of their holy men, standing nude, facing the sun, cloaked with a panther skin, and I continued on my way. Sixteen years later I happened to return to the same place—and there he was, unmoved.

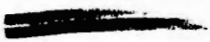
It was so hot fish at the bottom of the river burned like silk touched by a flame.

And I saw far off the coast of that land a thing in the sky, huge as a cloud, but black and moving faster than the clouds. I asked what that thing could be, and they said it is the great bird Rokh. But the wind was blowing off the coast, and the Rokh went with it, and I never got a closer look.

In India the birds and animals are completely different from ours, except for one: the quail.

. . .

All of the imagery and some of the language are derived from works written in the 500 years prior to 1492. India, of course, is where Columbus thought he was going. After that first voyage, and Vasco da Gama's arrival on the Malabar Coast in 1498, the dreams of India become quite different.



Jed Rasula

THE STYLE OF OLD AGE

Is there an imagination that sits enthroned
As grim as it is benevolent, the just
And the unjust, which in the midst of summer stops

To imagine winter?

("The Auroras of Autumn")

These lines of Wallace Stevens, written at age 68, seem to embody the gist of his late wintery work. As readily as they leap to mind, however, thinking of old age and poetry, they are a *statement* of age and not its style, as such. There *is* a style of old age which is a major portion of the legacy of 20th century American poetry. It is recognizable not by stylistic traits or perspectives attained in aging, but by realizing that imagination reflects its levels of maturation in its means of expression. Classic Chinese poetry was long nurtured on this principle, and poets routinely began writing the conceits of aging into their verses from about the age of thirty on. Stevens, like the great T'ang poets, rehearsed the mode in advance, so that when the authentic voice arose, the style was in place:

It is an illusion that we were ever alive,
Lived in the houses of mothers, arranged ourselves
By our own motions in a freedom of air. ("The Rock")

The notion of a style of old age in American poetry came to me, fittingly, in midwinter, outdoors, in familiar terrain defamiliarized by deep snow, bare branches, and most of all the revelation of the structure of the land, unobscured by leaves and surface growth. Resting occasionally while skiing through these woods I would resume my reading of Zukofsky's *"A" 22-23,* just published in that attractively portable Grossman edition, 1975. Read in the New Hampshire woods a dozen miles inland from the Atlantic, the initial figuration in *"A" 22* of "135,000 years built up/from 75 foot depth the/coast gained from the sea" was immediate, local, and visible. This section of *"A" 22* functions as a stylistic abridgement of geological time, chronicling the succession of life-forms fossilized in a bog in "archaic time unchanged unchangeable," in which the imagination overlaps for a moment with the prospect of its own demise:

> The departed celestial radiated alive
> under earth rest will not
> return above to hunger, sustained
> by mayapple root, their children
> unmolested fleeted by glowworms before
> stars course ocean flicker continents... (*"A"* p. 513)

The language is so spare as to almost elude restatement in any other terms. At times it even *defies* the possibility of a literal correlate. It approximates the geological concreteness of the elements it invokes,

> semblance of two-headed hammer flogging
> sieves emblazed suns, Cypress hidden
> sky-starred bema, god egg-candled
> kindling—falling toward—earth cypress,
> at one with the hill-genius
> wistaria cloaked, ivy girded smiling
> lost in azalea, fallen meteor,
> vine winding in twisted laurel
> elbows wintering green—naming gazes
> on undergrowth berry *I'm hers*—
> profiting children with song whose
> laws are another time veiled
> timeless, consoling the aged reading
> of a past meeting sorrow,
> 'pine, wherever your hanging garden,
> my prince, comb our hearts—
> as soft pine-needle your hair.' (*"A"* pp. 550-551)

The text, attentively read, leaves impressions similar to those left by other poems. But what Zukofsky forces the reader to ask is why the words so insistently abbreviate everything that comes into view. The words are dense chunks of delimiting matter. Elements strictly private to the poet are there, but a syntactic relaxation suspends them, lets them become interpersonal, familiar, like language. And it is language above all that we experience here, with no disguise, no pretense to being anything else, in the style of old age.

Alterstil, the style of old age, is not as readily recognized a literary term as *Jugendstil.* Its German origins are understandable when you reflect on the particular contribution to the arts of Germans in their later years. Goethe is the progenitor of the style of old age ("What! have I reached the age of eighty merely to think the same things all the time?"), though late Beethoven springs as readily to mind. Three of the most esteemed German novels of this century are cornerstones of that country's sense of its style of old age: Mann's *Doctor Faustus,* Hesse's *The Glass Bead Game* and Broch's *Death of Virgil.*

Leonardo, Michaelangelo and Titian were long held as heralds of power and reckoning in old age. Since Bach and Beethoven music has become a ready means of discerning the style of old age. Verdi's inspired *Otello* and *Falstaff* caught public attention not only for their intrinsic value, but because of the composer's advanced age. Brahms' late piano pieces (op. 116, 118, 119) are commonly referred to as "autumnal." Liszt's late piano works are perhaps the most authentic revelations of the style of old age, in their haunting dissolution of tonality. Pianist Alfred Brendel has written of Liszt that "It seems as if the shrinkage of the ageing personality has left room for the impersonal, for archaic force." That archaic force is there in Schoenberg's *Moses and Aron,* Busoni's *Doctor Faustus,* and especially in Janacek's last years, which brought to light his *Glagolitic Mass, Sinfonietta,* four chamber masterpieces and the operas *Katya Kabanova, The Cunning Little Vixen, The Makropolous Case* and *The House of the Dead*—the most prolific *Alterstil* summation I know of. Turner's late light-saturated paintings are not simply visionary but a style of old age. Other instances can be multiplied, from Rodin and Picasso to Kandinsky, Yeats and Beckett. But it's not been realized that the latest manifestation of the style of old age is a central aspect of the legacy of 20th century American poetry. A simple recitation of the names is almost enough to suffice: Pound, Williams, H.D., Stevens, Eliot, Jeffers, Olson, Zukofsky, Oppen...

Our youth-oriented culture makes it hard to recognize the value of a style of old age, despite the many instances that can be enumerated. The

frenzied acclaim for precocious talent—from Keats to Rimbaud to Elvis Presley—provides one of the few absolute continuities of our era. It is fitting that in this context the most telling exponent of a style of old age should be Hermann Broch at the end of his life in his essay "The Style of the Mythical Age."*

Broch goes back to the beginnings of the Western tradition for evidence, noting that "... the style of old-age in all its greatness, coolness and abstract transparency is so obvious in [Homer's] work that people had necessarily to conceive him in this form." We know nothing of Homer's actual age, of course, but it remains a basic feature of our interest in *Alterstil* that it is an act of imagination on a reader's part that marks the lineaments of the style. It is a primary feature of the style of old age that it elicits passionate participation, not dispassionate praise. Otherwise, the writings of the old remain just that—documents of age, as such, or gratuitous caps to honored careers. The writings of the old, to truly attain to a style, must possess an imaginative acuteness that can stir the imagination of readers of any age.

Some basic features of the style of old age are that it reflects the proximity of death, it's a paring away of art to its essentials, a new style that is a *renewal of style,* a ripening that is a relief from the limitations of human dimensions and perspectives, a glance into the essential structure of the world. A work in the style of old age is invigorated by an enlarged prospect that includes death, absorbing it as one of the indestructible elements that are to be engaged, affirmatively. The Jugendstil response to death represents the opposite theme, which is the poignance or anguish of so little time remaining. The style of old age must have, on the part of its artist, an entire preceding body of work, so that there's no chance of that Jugendstil yearning to obscure the deep instincts aroused by the prospect of personal extinction.

The style of old age is a *style* because it is the language of the medium, exposed in its essentiality. It is not a style in the sense of a phase, a set of expendable gestures, or a personal touch. It's not a theme. Nor is it the testimony of old age (though that may be found in it). It is above all an art in which the economy of means is a means. Like Stevens' mind that stops in the midst of summer to imagine winter, it sees through the superficial abundance to the imaginal plenitude disclosed only by stripping away, peeling off, turning over, emptying out. It is a vision of diminishment that doesn't shrink its exposition, as in H.D.'s *Winter Love,* section 3:

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*Broch's essay was written in English as an introduction to Rachel Bespaloff's book *On the Iliad* (number IX in the Bollingen Series).

Now there is winter-love, a winter-lover
who would take gladly—fondling the crisp leaves
with a padded paw, sheathed—glad to find

in the den, the sacred lair, no trap to entice,
no rapacious loins, and sighs, not groans—
no rain of arrows, no poisonous thrust of spears,

no thundering on the stairs,
no rasp of steel,
only Taygetus' silence,

till a drift of snow
slides from a branch,
then, silence more intense.

It was the extremity of compression in Zukofsky that first alerted me to the style of old age. Broch refers to "the building of a new vocabulary out of syntax" which is surely to the point of *"A" 22-23*. There are contortions of syntax in poems from the later *Maximus,* too, that contribute to a new vocabulary. Some of the vagaries critics complain of in the late Olson may more profitably be regarded as acute testimony in the style of old age, as in "The winter the *Gen. Starks* was stuck," "The whole thing has run so fast away it breaks my heart," "*Same Day, Later*" or "Just as Morning Twilight . . ." with its unforgettable resolution:

. . . Go down, moon and teach me too to

swallow what by analogy and continuity I now, at 55 know is

as much condition as the purchase of my soul by love as they

Such lines introduce to the American idiom the poetic equivalent of a new entry to the chart of elements in chemistry.

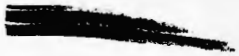
American poetry has been unusually blessed in the number of its poets who have lived and continued writing into their seventh and eighth decades or beyond. Not all represent, to my mind, styles of old age, though some are worth considering. Jeffers and cummings, for instance, don't appear to have undergone any notable change of idiom in their last collections, but in both there is a heightened resolution in the expression of their lifelong convictions. A revolution in syntax and diction is strongest in Zukofsky and Olson, and this may be partly due to the extremely resonant precedent of old age in the generation of their immediate predecessors.

Even in the case of Zukofsky and Olson, however, it is a re-emphasis of myth and a relative diminishment of history that forces the late style to crystallize—and this follows the example of their masters. The modernist generation experienced the First World War in the full flush of maturity, only to confront the second during the years most formative for a style of old age. In varying ways, Pound's *Pisan Cantos,* H.D.'s *Trilogy,* Eliot's *Four Quartets,* Stevens' *Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction* and Jeffers' last phase all embody tormented responses to the war. In each instance, history is not abandoned (which might be the response of younger poets), but penetrated, seen through, demythified by means of myth itself. History is the 20th century's myth of realism, whereas traditional mythology takes on the character of a *natural resource.*

Broch has this to say about the fate of the arts in the postwar world: "If art can or may exist further, it has to set itself the task of striving for the essential, of becoming a counterbalance to the hypertrophic calamity of the world. And imposing such a task on the arts, this epoch of disintegration imposes on them the style of old-age, the style of the essential, the style of the abstract." Read in an American context—in the American text—it's possible to see that "history" in its conventional form is the story of man, while myth is the story of the cosmos. In the American style of old age, human schemes and resolutions count for very little. Pound, Williams and Eliot all became apostles of humility. Jeffers exulted in mankind's imminent demise. The central poems by these and the other major figures in American *Alterstil* celebrate the rudimentary cycles of natural phenomena. Zukofsky and Williams end with flowers, Pound with squirrels and bluejays, Jeffers with the surf and Olson with the tides, Stevens with a rock of which he says—as if for all his fellow poets of old age—

> . . . This is the cure
> Of leaves and of the ground and of ourselves. ("The Rock")

A great age of poetry—like T'ang in China—may be impossible without the profound transparencies attained in a style of old age, traceable not in one but in a host of figures. Amidst the cantankerous jostling for position among proponents for a *tradition* (a poor substitute for style and wisdom), it may have been forgotten that in our poetry of old age, the great era of American poetry is already in our hands. Is it too much to recall that *gratitude* is a profound emotion?



NOTES, CORRESPONDENCE, REVIEWS.

A Felt Architectonics of the Numinous: Robert Duncan's *Ground Work*

New Directions, 1984.

In 1968, with the publication of *Bending the Bow,* Robert Duncan declared that he would not publish another book for fifteen years, an audacious act in a period when poetry is often judged by standards of the market rather than the art itself. Duncan's reasons for not publishing have much to do with that market, particularly the way that it determines what shall be printed and in what form. He has always attempted to maintain control over the production of his work so that its printing would reflect his own notational intentions. As his work on "Passages" continued during the 1960's he became concerned that the page be a score for performance and that spacing, margins and orthographic conventions be respected as generative elements in the poem. In the late 1960's, with the printing of *Tribunals,* and later with the special issue of *Maps* devoted to his work, Duncan became increasingly frustrated with what he took to be printers' lack of regard for this intent, and in a long essay printed in that latter volume, he outlined some of his feelings on the matter. Addressing John Taggart, the magazine's editor, Duncan writes:

> This very matter of the typewriter and the author's work and the emergence of the idea of our taking over the means of the production of our copy into

> our own hands is where we must start out.... When I speak of the poet's intention that must govern the text, I speak of an entity of the Imagination that what I most truly am serves. In the poet's intentions, I am calld to my fullest responsibility, to my responsibility for a community of poets that I have come to in the commune of Poetry itself.

His "fullest responsibility" includes his obligation to the book as well as to the individual element within it, but at the time that he wrote these words Duncan was beginning to feel constrained by the idea of the book itself. From the very first, with "Medieval Scenes" and "The Venice Poem," and later with *A Book of Resemblances* and *The Opening of the Field,* Duncan has been a writer of the book, considered as a composed entity in which all parts contribute to the whole. The problem with such composition is that the poet is confined to that structure, however open, and so it may have been with this limitation in mind that he began to think of a long, free period of writing without any obligation to some total unit.

The fifteen year hiatus is now over, and New Directions has brought out the first of a proposed two-book gathering which will include all of the work composed during this period. Of course Duncan has published portions of the book ("Santa Cruz Propositions," "A Seventeenth Century Suite," "Dante Études") in various places, either in magazines or in small pamphlets. For a while he distributed photocopied pages from his notebooks to his friends as a way of keeping his most immediate readers up to date with his work, but this is his first sustained collection since *Bending the Bow* and so is worth special consideration.

New Directions has solved the problem of typographic intention and notation by printing directly from the author's typescript, allowing the poet to control all aspects of spacing, and to further elucidate his idea of versification, Duncan has written a prefatory statement on notation. In order to accommodate his extraordinarily long lines, the press has provided a wider page than the usual paperback format, a gesture that gives the book a solidity and weight appropriate to its contents. The cover features a paste-up by Jess which contains, in microcosm, some of the crucial materials of Duncan's poetics. A young man drinks water from a tin cup offered him by a hand reaching out of a kind of hieratic coat of arms. The shield is divided into four sections, each one representing some aspect of the creative process: candles to suggest, perhaps, the light of inspiration; a window to suggest vision and reflection; a lyre to celebrate music; and a web to suggest "disorders of the net" of language and syntax. The shield and young man are superimposed over a sphere that resembles, on the one hand, a closeup of the human eye but which could as easily be an aerial view of the planet—the two perspectives, near and far, that define Duncan's vision. At the bottom of the sphere are two hands, one of which is writing with a pen. It is a beautiful synthesis of the "ground" from which *Groundwork* arises: the Poet receiving a refreshing drink of clear water from the universe of signs and images.

I have dwelt at such length on the history and physical design of the book because so much of *Groundwork* concerns the material form in which poetry

appears and the narrative it articulates. For Duncan, poetry is not a matter of individual poems but of Poetry, "Grand Collage" of the individual's creative potential. The immediate event—a slight pause between two words, the distinction between two phonemes—represents entry into what Duncan calls a "felt architectonics . . . of the numinous." This phrase could describe the ways that poetry participates in a structure larger than itself (the origins of one's language, the numinous presence of Deity) but which is "felt" as a structure that one creates. Dante is the genius of this notion for Duncan, and he is, to some extent, the book's patron saint.

Because the book is written from the standpoint of testimony rather than from an assertion of artisanal mastery it will be all the harder for some to read. The language is often vatic and rhetorical, and the diction archaic and abstract:

> Oh Need, beloved Adversary to Love's settlements,
> Invader, the halcyon days are over. (63)

Although the thematic material of the book extends from *Bending the Bow,* the strong precursor to this book is *Roots and Branches* with its high romantic diction and neoplatonic subjects. During the period of *Bending the Bow,* when the nation needed the demotic voice of "Up-Rising" to shake it loose, Duncan's tone could be heard with the full urgency of its occasion, but one wonders if in the discursive 1980's it will be heard as clearly.

The best introduction to *Ground Work* is the poet's 1968 essay, "Man's Fulfillment in Order and Strife" (printed in *Caterpillar* 8/9) in which Duncan articulates "the great theme of War" that haunts both *Bending the Bow* as well as the current volume. In that essay, he contrasts the productive role of contention in poetry with the authoritarian version of contention embodied in the Vietnam War. For the poet, "the very life of our art is our keeping at work contending forces and convictions." This is the "creative strife" of Heraclitus who sees War as the principle of generation. Modern warfare in southeast Asia, on the other hand, makes war "too terrible for men to wage," as Duncan says in "Up-Rising." *Ground Work* begins in the late days of that unhappy adventure, and in many respects the relation between individual volition and political hegemony forms the primary theme of the book's opening poems.

But the thematics of War and conflict are only half of a dialectic that advances the book's Heraclitean subject. In a line from "Empedoklean Reveries" Duncan makes this dialectic painfully clear:

> "Because of what we love we are increasingly at War."

The poet's operative spacing nicely illustrates the indissoluble bond between desire and conflict: we are because of what we love and we are, by this desire, increasingly at war. The near rhyme of "are" and "War" adds to the paradox by linking Being and opposition in sound. The interplay between love and war animates all of the poems in the volume. In Duncan's rendering of Southwell's great poem, "The Burning Babe," for example, the sixteenth-century poet's mystical experience of Christ's incarnation becomes, for the contemporary poet, a

doubled vision of sacrifice in the ricefields of southeast Asia:

> The vision of a burning babe I see
> doubled in my sight. The one
> alight in that fire of passion that tries the soul
> is such a Child as Southwell saw his Christ to be:
>
> This is not a baby on fire but a babe of fire,
> flesh burning with its own flame, not toward death
> but alive with flame, suffering its *self*
> the heat of the heart the rose was hearth of;

It is not that Duncan denies the possibility of incarnation because of the Vietnam holocaust (and how easily a lesser poet would "make use" of Southwell's imagery for an ironizing intent!) but that the same creative heat that generates belief is, by a perverted zeal, turned into the flames of a secular martyrdom. In this poetry of secular and sacred incarnation, Duncan is most like his metaphysical forebears and really has no peer in the modern period.

The "Great Theme of War" is dramatically evident in the group of "Passages" that were printed as *Tribunals* and which appear in the early part of the book. "Before the Judgment" is one of Duncan's most powerful declamations against the misuse of power, a poem written in the strident voice of earlier "Passages" like "The Multiversity" and "The Fire":

> and here, wrapt in the stench of vegetable rot,
>
> destroyd forests and fields,
> and from the villages the putrid dead,
> phantasms of industrial enterprise
> swell fat upon the news of the daily body-count;
>
> after the age of lead, the age of gas, fossil fuels
> oil slick on the water, petroleum spread,
> the stink of gasoline in the murky air,
> the smoking tankers crawl towards Asia—
>
> men with fossil minds, with oily tongues
> "to lick the mirror of Narkissos" (28)

These War Passages rival Pound's Hell Cantos in their invocation of a contemporary bolgia of the war makers, but Duncan recognizes his own complicity in the making of war, even as it infects poetry:

> Discontent with that first draft. Where one's own
> hatred enters Hell gets out of hand.
>
> Again and again Virgil ever standing by Dante
> must caution him. (28)

It is such caution that Duncan urges towards his own peers, particularly Denise Levertov in "Santa Cruz Propositions," that in protesting the historical war we do not become the very warmakers we attack.

Ground Work is dominated by several long series or sequences in addition to the "Passages" that appear throughout the volume. "Santa Cruz Propositions," "Poems from the Margins of Thom Gunn's *Moly,*" "A Seventeenth Century Suite...," the "Dante Etudes" are, in a sense, books within the book. Like many of his earlier poems they are "reading writings," poems that take their impetus from other texts but find their own resonance in the poet's immediate concerns. Newspaper accounts of a grisly murder in the Santa Cruz mountains provide a backdrop for a lengthy meditation on Plato's theory of love; Thom Gunn's book, *Moly* generates a series of poems on homosexual themes; the "metaphysical genius" of Herbert, Southwell, Jonson and others provides a frame for variations on theological and aesthetic subjects; Dante's prose advances propositions of social and poetic order in "Dante Etudes"; and in "Circulations of the Song," the work of the Persian poet, Rumi, is the basis for a series of love poems. These are difficult series, written so close to the rhetoric of the source text that they often exclude the reader, yet they are basic to Duncan's practice. They show the poet treating his language as part of a common inheritance in which he is both original and derivative.

This dismantling of origins is an impish fact of Duncan's poetics; in order to live as the fulfillment of a tradition (and he has always insisted that he is a traditional poet) he needs to re-write literary history in his terms. Dante is not "...researcht in the lore of another time... but immediate, everlastingly immediate, to the presence of the idea of Poetry," an attitude that puts Duncan squarely in line with his modernist masters. Dante's Florence becomes the city-state known as the United States and his specifically Christian world becomes the secular reality of modern social institutions. As Duncan says in his preface to *Bending the Bow,* "The real universe of Christendom had so become an imaginary world by the thirteenth century that Dante could enter it in a poem as primary vision and explore even its mysteries in the structure of his rimes." And Duncan would like to so "enter" Dante's world. Reading, for example, in *De Vulgari Eloquentia* of Gotto of Mantua, "who... always wove into his stanza one line unaccompanied by a rhyme, which he called the key," Duncan asserts "the fullest licence" to write his own partially rhymed canzone:

> others having their resonance
> in the canzone reminds us
>
> so that district by district
> in the canzone reminds us
>
> in the arrangement, every
> wisht-for licence conceded
>
> of the familiar places
> in the last lines
> most beautifully disposed
>
> as if they fell with a rhyme
> into silence. (111)

The vowel play of long i's, the syncopated rhythms and long, subordinated sentence create a wonderful music out of Dante's line. The vital word, "key," used to refer to the unrhymed word in the canzone becomes, for Duncan, a reference to the "familiar" and familial spaces that are opened in poetry. Thus, what Dante describes as the structure of rhyme becomes, for Duncan, the structure of all ordered systems—including that of the city.

What I have called Duncan's rewriting of origins occurs not only within the terms of cultural institutions and literature but in terms of his own history. The poet's biography becomes a narrative, no less subject to variations than the myths and stories out of which his poetry is composed. Duncan could hardly be considered a "confessional" poet, but when he focuses on specifically personal matters (as he does in many of the book's shorter lyrics) he is painfully honest even while projecting their narrative dimensions. My favorite among the shorter lyrics of this order is "Despair in Being Tedious" in which Duncan reflects on his own volubility:

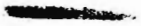
> A long way back I look and find myself
> as I was then I am, a circling man
> in a seizure of talk that he hears too as he goes on.
>
> The silence of the room was empty and I
> cried aloud. At ten o'clock, went out
> and walkt the empty streets again,
>
> came into the crowded bar for company
> and talkt of leaving when the rains began.
> Some listend and some tired of me.
>
> I do not know if I am bound
> tu run upon this wheel, wound up,
> excited in a manic spiel of wheel in wheel...

The iambic cadence is held throughout, and whereas in someone like Lowell, such cadences distance the author from his confession, here it serves to heighten the "drone of wonders" of which the author is acutely aware.

I mentioned at the outset that this book will be hard for some to hear. The proposition that "Everything Speaks to Me" may be read by others as "I exclude all but my hearing," and indeed, Duncan often admits to a one-way conversation with his poem: "My world in speech/answers some ultimate need I know,// aroused, pours forth upon the sands/again and again/lines written for the audience of the sea." The burden of testimony and belief is that at the moment when language is asked to speak for a realm beyond itself it must relinquish its power to speak at all. Duncan's recent poems approach an almost Mallarmean opacity and spareness, as though sieving out all grit of local association and leaving the sheer performative power of the single word. He wants to name "It" without naming any contingent reality to which "it" refers. One may prefer those pieces in which Duncan's syntactic and semantic playfulness is most at work (the homages to Jack Spicer, Wallace Stevens and Jess for example), but the point is

not which poems one "prefers" but one's willingness to see the larger ground of *Ground Work*. And that larger ground, curiously enough, concerns the reader—the degree to which he or she is willing to go along with the sweep and flow of Duncan's unfashionably eclectic intellect.

MICHAEL DAVIDSON



Resistance
Charles Bernstein
Awede, 1983

Sighted as a marker of his process, Bernstein's title, *Resistance*, suggests at least two reciprocally informing models of how his language will function in the text: first, that of a language resistant to—a stressed force countering—the generation of a singularly resolute standard of meaning; second, that of a language sabotaging the dominant linguistic codes, particularly the moral base of the rhetorical, which define and formalize a method of discursive thinking (reading, writing) grounded in the appeal to certainty, or rectitude. As such, any determinate reading of this work is consistently undermined by the fluctuation of meanings occurring within it. The question for Bernstein becomes where, as readers, do we—can we—stand in relation to a text which ceaselessly destabilizes our position in it. Thus, one of the dialectics fronted is the certainty of a reader's response to any given compositional unit in one poem as it is juxtaposed against his/her uncertainty of response to the variable recurrences of that unit in another poem, or within the same one. In the opening of the first piece, "Consideration," and the beginning of the fourth in the sequence, "Fever Of Case," Bernstein broaches these two poles of readerly response to the work:

> Feelings that grant promises
> alone am cured of. A salient
> detonation, tangled and flickering, to
> up till vexed, mottled plum
> that stands at guard, gorged
> by the pensive percussion I
> develop all too slowly out of,
> implicitly to maroon a
> mobile flare—the slant
> of any rest, afloat with
> wonder, heaves. (from "Consideration")

Slowly has this levelled up a certain feel
Under always so of palliation
Hardly pressing more to want
Had surged reluctance constant
Fairly clouds of swirls
Moved to finally only
Yesterday's evidentiary pole (from "Fever Of Case")

Between these poems, as throughout *Resistance,* meanings fluctuate through a variable duplication of terms and tones. For instance, the statemental sound of "Consideration"'s first line paradoxically guarantees a rejection of "feelings that grant promises," or guarantees (of definitive meanings perhaps?) With the padded impact of "a *salient detonation*"—two terms striking the same semantic note twice—these "feelings," if they *are* the referential points here, emerge "tangled and flickering," spontaneously and seemingly undefined. Yet one has to be careful here, since "detonation" implies a calculated act, one which requires and develops out of "a pensive percussion." To compound the reader's problems, the first line of "Fever Of Case," unlike "Consideration"'s opening, tonally registers as an indefinite grasping on the level of intuitive order while semantically retaining, in the phrase "a certain feel," "Consideration"'s suggestion of "feelings" as uncertain, unspecified gestural acts outside the frame of a logically received meaning. There is, however, the other sense of "certain" to consider here, making the "feelings" which assured nothing in "Consideration" now "certain" of themselves as producers of meaning and also, by implication, inseparable from the meanings they produce. To further destabilize the reader's perspective, Bernstein lets the words "cured of" in one poem be recalled and muted by "palliation" in the other, suggesting that the "speaker" who was "cured of" certifying his emerging "feelings" is now only relieved of doing so and thus prone to contextualizing them. Resemblances between the two poems continue as "to up till vexed" is mirrored by "hardly pressing," with one sense of the latter phrase effortlessly, softly sustaining and undermining the earlier "vexed" note—as if what were "vexed" turned into a "hardly [barely] pressing" matter—and another sense of it reinforcing the troubled, forcefully "pressing" urgency of "to up till vexed."

The value of such work lies in its capacity to challenge the reader's assumptions about what constitutes meaning at each point in the compositional process. In the title "The Sheds Of Our Webs," for example, the reader's eyes are entangled in an exchange of meanings projected from the page, so that the "sheds," as structures or framing mechanisms, are seen to be shedding and stacking their parts to form "our webs." Here text is perceived as fabric (textile, web), composing and decomposing its (de)signs, with the process of re-making it new always apparent to Bernstein's imagination. Also apparent, as the poem begins, is the manner in which time is composed:

Floating on completely vested time, alacrity
To which abandon skirts another answer

Or part of but not returned.
Confined to snare, the sumpter portion
Rolls misty ply on foxglove, thought
Of once was plentitude of timorous
Lair, in fact will build around
It. Shores that glide me, a
Tender for unkeeping, when fit with
Sticks embellish empty throw. Days, after
All, which heave at having had.

Caught in its own unravelling, the language here draws attention to itself as subject by first seeking to clothe or "embellish" what it speaks of—i.e., fitting time—and then by abandoning or skirting a method of poetic speech that would dress up its subjects ("*vested* time," "abandon *skirts*") to fit its message, or "answer." In proposing questions as to how language contextualizes and metaphorizes experience, this poem enacts a response to readers and writers who still see poetry, in Creeley's words, "insist[ing] on those forms," and who "wouldn't know it *was* a woman unless she was wearing a dress." Located in economic terms, "The Sheds Of Our Webs" sustains one motif registered throughout *Resistance*: sighting words as "floating" capital—[legal] "tender for unkeeping," de-centered, resisting fixed values of meaning—and projecting a sense of how their meanings accumulate (are composed) and depreciate (shed).

It is precisely this quality of fluctuation between gain and loss of meanings which will attract one to *Resistance*. The reactive nature of the language consistently records an unsettling, buoying effect on the reader's senses and redirects any movement to place the reader would momentarily make. One reason for this can be located in the engaging pull of the rhetorical—elevated, stately—tonal markers scattered throughout the text: signs which have traditionally presupposed the impulse to authoritative statement and representation as grounds for their univocal meanings, but which here function as devices "fit [to] . . . embellish [the] empty throw[s]," or the meanings spotted circumferentially around an unspecified, lost center of meaning. Bernstein's use of moral intensifiers to hollow out the rhetorical sweep encompassing these honored message-centers is, at times, comic, as in this from "If There Were A God She Wouldn't Expect Us To Believe In Her":

Who honors these
chicken feed
anyway, torqued
by the lacquered
arguments, trumped up
out of shuttling—
bystanders? (my emphasis)

Elsewhere, as in "Bulge," these intensifiers shape a rhetoric which concretizes, contracts, and conditions the emergence of meaning from even the most morally paradoxical of situations, only to make its case:

The reward for
love is not
love, any more
than the reward
for disobedience
is grace. *What*
chains these
conditions severs
semblance of
a hand, two
fists, in preemptive
embrace with
collusion. (my emphasis)

The rhetorical models Bernstein sets up and deflates obviously function as pointers to the societal power structures they help perpetuate. Accordingly, language in *Resistance* is tapped from various traditionally "non-poetic" sources—political, legal, medical, economic—in order to supplant the moral appeal to certainty which their jargons explicitly attempt to "embellish" and propose. Bernstein exposes their message-centers as morally empty and exhausted, and his writing embodies them only to immediately betray any claims to certainty they would intend. It is a writing which does not delimit its labor in exchange for the reader's unequivocal comprehension, or possession. From "Forensic Gastronomy":

The internal logic
of possession of
what can not be
known about
or gardened
governs
all the habitudes
in a congenital
series of
absolute distractions
flushed with patency
and pestered
dumb with
the breeze.

Considering this rhetorical discourse, I find it difficult to understand how Gerald Burns, in his criticism of Bernstein's work published in *Sulfur* 9, cannot locate a "sustained tone" in *Resistance*: "It's just that [sustained] tone [as can be found in Lewis Carroll's *Snark*] your methods make impossible, and your methods make it impossible by destroying context as the *matrix* of reference." Readers of *Resistance* will find just the opposite to be the case, and they will no doubt hear a sustained—the more accurate word would be buoyed—rhetorically moral tone as one of several tones registered and re-contextualized from line to line, from word to word, in the text. Either Burns can't hear well or

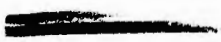
he's not read the work as thoroughly as he's claimed. If he had, he would have also noticed that *Resistance* resonates with the "almost-caught meaning[s]" he denies "language-centered" material in general and Bernstein's writings in particular. (See, for instance, the first line of "Fever Of Case" quoted above, and how the word "levelled" in "levelled up a certain feel" suggests a certain *field* in the process of being raised and "levelled"—like a fever brought down to case—but always fluctuating.) Clearly, in "How to Nonread," Burns has mounted a specious attack on Bernstein and other "language-centered" writers which is based on misguided assumptions about their poetics rather than informed perceptions of their disparate practices. His criticism is evidence that the only way to "nonread" a text is to do precisely what he's done: not read it. And this he has done eloquently, privileging himself not to follow Bernstein's texts into the world.

For those who do not "nonread," the pleasures afforded by *Resistance* will be striking. Like a pressure sensitive needle, the language in this book records a confluence of semantic values as it constantly shifts the reader's focus on the material. In generating a syntactical order built on the compound senses of a word, Charles Bernstein has discovered a site where language is concentrated and projected as a ceaseless multiplication of displaced signs, and where the reader is drawn into the text as one of those signs. This is a territory where, as Edmond Jabes has written, "every word unveils another tie," and where language, in Bernstein's words, appears as "indelibly repurcussive." The misspelling of "repurcussive" brings to mind Williams' words in "The Descent of Winter," which no doubt address the effect Bernstein's work here can sustain:

> There are no perfect waves—
> Your writings are a sea
> full of misspellings and
> faulty sentences. Level. Troubled...
>
> This is the sadness of the sea—
> waves like words, all broken—
> a sameness of lifting and falling mood.

Let the faults of other writings be equally well mined.

BENJAMIN HOLLANDER



Herself Defined: The Poet H. D. and Her World

BARBARA GUEST
Doubleday, 1984

An interesting living poet writing about a famous older poet is automatically worth attention. Are the secrets of influence to be revealed? Do kindred hearts tell more? Will there be envy, spiteful exposure—or mock appreciation? Cat fights or the odor of rose sachet? Will it be told how the transfer of power occurs? Will the poet-biographer write as a poet in the style of her poems—in Guest's case, very oblique and witty?

Actually, she quickly adopts a style that shoulders a lot of information firmly and with no apparent grunt and sweat of effort. Normal prose, not flash-dance; she doesn't shake it out in scarves and veils and accessories. Her style is classically cut—calm, confident, and serviceable—and walks right along with the burden of the story. There are the occasional felicities of wit we might expect from a poet, such as calling Ezra Pound's circle of friends his "pounderama," or the charming cleverness of, "Dedicated to sun-worship in people as well as nature, [Harry "Black Sun"] Crosby could always detect sunspots," but one might not have expected a prose so continuous (Guest's own poetry, like her novel *Seeking Air,* is not).

Most of all, there is plenty of useful information for any highly metabolizing imagination, such as Pound being called "Ray" (as in "Ez-ray") as a young man, or that Fenimore Cooper's unforgettable Chingachgook was buried (inexplicably) in H. D.'s Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. But first in significance comes the fact that H. D. herself was 5'11", and later, when she got over her adolescent shame and slouch, she carried all of it high and imperiously; or the fact that Bryher, H. D.'s companion since 1918, had never made so much as a pot of tea for herself until she was 26 years old.

The book is admirably researched, with a good use of published memoirs, letters, and unpublished manuscripts. Guest is particularly good on the role of the Moravian Brotherhood in H. D.'s early life (similar to the Hermetic Brotherhood in Robert Duncan's). I can't imagine a major discovery left out, unless it is how H. D. and Bryher *really* treated Perdita, H. D.'s daughter by Cecil Grey. The plot sometimes gets gummy with the web of relationships—but that may be all that that world was. The husbands seem cads; Robert McAlmon was given the name "McAlimony" after his divorce from Bryher, which was a payoff divorce. The chapter on Freud is a disappointment because the relationship, through H. D.'s account of it, was really a disappointment.

There is Bryher the great manager, who has Perdita sent to vocational school to learn cooking and housekeeping in case the Communists take over the world. H. D.'s belief in psychoanalysis (which she habitually abbreviated "ps-a") can be sympathized with if no longer shared. At 43, H. D. wanted to be a movie star (at the time Jean Harlow was 18). Her former Bryn Mawr schoolmate,

Marianne Moore, may have been her greatest rival, or ought to have been, although neither may have felt it. H. D.'s assessment of Moore's *Selected Poems* in 1935 barely conceals her feelings: "I do like Marianne Moore's poems, but they leave me a little stricken or shriven or shrivelled, somehow. It is [a] very 'crab' world, collecting junk under the sea from old hulks; it sometimes reminds me of myself," she says rather immodestly, "—much that is exquisite"!

It is hard not to be distracted by the fact that Bryher's father left, in today's figures, over $800 million, and that H. D. herself became worth several million in her later years. William Carlos Williams, in contrast—although he seems maligned in the course of the book—actually appears lucky he had his daily practice to keep him in touch with realities. Every life has at least one lurking revelation that makes biographies endlessly fascinating. Here, it is possibly H. D. urinating, at his own request, on Havelock Ellis (which had been revealed by Phyllis Grosskurth in her biography of Ellis—though perhaps not in time for Janice S. Robinson's 1982 life of H. D., which doesn't mention it).

New York readers will quicken to discover that around 1915 when Amy Lowell gave a lecture on Imagism at St. Mark's in the Bowery, 927 people were in attendance. (A way to measure the falling off of poetry? Not really, not fairly. In the days before the talkies, even a lecture on honeydew melons would have drawn a crowd of forty people.) Still, one knows the unuttered amazement and longing with which Guest reports the great "Reading of Famous Poets," held at the Aeolian Hall in London in 1943 and attended by the Queen Mother as well as the princesses Elizabeth (present QEII) and Margaret (who sat on stage next to Eliot). The event was sold out days ahead, even before it was known the Queen would be present.

There is even material in the book for Stephen King. H. D. to Bryher (offering her the chance to bring up Perdita):

"I want you to promise me to grow up and take care of the little girl."

"Do you mean—do you mean... for my own... exactly like a puppy?"

"*Exactly*... like a puppy."

But my favorite story, thanks to Guest's versatile wit, is one of Pound walking in on Harriet Weaver sipping a rare taste of wine:

> Like Mary Poppins arriving by umbrella from another world, the maiden lady from London, Harriet Weaver, appeared. Bryher had urged her to come over to Paris, where she would be welcomed by her loyal and grateful admirers. Timidly she ventured to a dinner party where there awaited her the McAlmons, H. D., Djuna Barnes, and the William Birds. The group urged this daring woman who had fearlessly struck out against the obscenity laws in order to publish Joyce's work to sip a small glass of wine. Gathering her courage, Miss Weaver finally decided to taste the exotic drink. As she was sipping the wine, Pound entered the restaurant, and upon observing her glass made some sort of idiotic remark, such as 'Drunk again, Miss Weaver?' The abstemious Miss Weaver really believed that a few drops of wine caused one to be drunk. She looked thoroughly frightened....

Guest maintains her relative objectivity in presenting all this information and feels free to criticize H. D. without belittling her. The constant invocation of H. D.'s "beauty," however, is a little dangerous. One begins to wonder what would have become of her—and, more importantly, of the poems—if she hadn't been graced that way? Personal beauty is a risky quality to invoke where a woman artist is involved; it can be too readily confused with a criterion. Is she being praised for her beauty or her poems? ("Do you love me for my money or my self?"; another name for a "celebrated beauty" is a "celebrity.") We who are alive now have only the poems. Moreover, was H. D.'s beauty a substitute for more "human" qualities? Was that a chief value in her world? Unfortunately, she may not have always photographed well. She's beautiful in 1919, but there is something gaunt about her face in the later photos, including one taken in Egypt (one naturally thinks *Helen in Egypt*) in 1923, hard and bossy, although Guest doesn't include the warmly sensual portrait by Man Ray that Susan Stanford Friedman uses as the frontispiece of her 1981 study of H. D., *Psyche Reborn.*

At times one wishes Guest had taken it upon herself to write more of what's called a "critical biography," with as much attention paid to the work as to the life. She might also have discriminated among the poetry more, taking time out in two or three instances to show in greater detail how the poems were made and how they work. Her reluctance to engage the poetry to any satisfactory depth leaves unanswered serious questions for readers who may themselves be practitioners. What exactly did H. D. do all day when she was locked up "working"? Were there many drafts, did she strain to economize or reach a rhyme, etc.? How exactly did she go about making her "translations" from the Greek if she had no Greek other than Mackail's prose translations? An examination of her method might reveal how deep or superficial her mind was (it is not always apparent from the poetry), and how seriously we should take her poetry. If we distrust its roots, it is a kind of poetry one can become very impatient with.

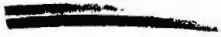
The hard thing to say about the biography—not the biography, actually, but the life—is that it doesn't make the poems any better, those that were not immediately, overtly good to begin with, such as *Trilogy* or some of the early Imagist pieces like "Oread" and the unsurpassable "Heat." I was particularly disappointed to find that *Hermetic Definitions,* with its promising title, was simply an adventure in fantasies. I thought H. D. *knew* something none of the rest of us did, that she had encountered the gods themselves, but it's just personal mythologizing. The first poem in that late series is about nothing more initiated and profound than her meeting with a *Newsweek* journalist named Lionel Durand, whom she had developed another one of her "crushes" on; while the "Groves of the Academe" section is no more than an encounter with St.-John Perse (the sequence could have been titled, bitterly, *Loves of an Aging Movie Queen*). It is not Guest's fault; she recognizes and seeks to deflect the obvious initial reaction: "This was not a foolish old woman's last ardor—that was not H. D.'s way. She could never view any event or any person as a single occurrence." Though I hope for Pound's and Aldington's and Bryher's sakes that it

was not literally true that "Durand, for the brief period he existed in her life, was as important to her as anyone she had known for years." It is possible, of course, that Guest unintentionally demystifies the work, but H. D.'s Greekism eventually seems no more than chinoiserie, a manner not a necessity.

The problem with H. D.'s poetics after Imagism was that she was never again able to resolve her images into metaphors. It may be a reflection of her life and possibly her hermaphroditism. Her personality seems to have been arrested, as evidenced by her repeated "crushes," her obsession with Aldington at intervals over ten, twenty, thirty, even forty years after their marriage. At least her hermaphroditism was consistent. There is no doubt that, no matter what a little manipulator and tyrant she was, Bryher was good for her. Indeed, Bryher's "realism" and engineering are at times a refreshing contrast to H. D.'s goddessizing.

There seems no moral center in H. D.'s world except art, and as Marianne Moore knew, and is quoted in the book as saying, it can be as exciting to pass the test for one's driver's license as to write a poem. Guest would not necessarily agree with this; her job has been to lay bare the life, and on the whole she has done a remarkable job. Any questions and frustrations that remain are in the subject not in her telling of the subject, and arise from the politics, including the sexual politics, of art.

GEORGE F. BUTTERICK



New & Selected Poems
TONY TOWLE
Kulchur Foundation, 1983.

In "Another Poem (New York Revisited)" Tony Towle describes his poetic "business" as the "unofficial" surveying of present-day New York. Survey, here, implies both comprehensive overview and detailed examination, and relates the work to a long tradition of urbane discursiveness, not unmixed with a certain fausse-naivete, which includes the Horatian Satires as well as John Gay's *Trivia* and Aragon's *Peasant of Paris.* This is to be distinguished from the more vitriolic line (the major line, however) of urban poets that includes, day, Catullus (T. S. Eliot once remarked of him that he seemed, in comparison with Virgil, a "ruffian"), Villon, and Baudelaire.

In "Addenda," in turn, Towle names the contemporary poets who have influenced him: Frank O'Hara, Kenneth Koch, John Ashbery, and James Schuyler, confirming Towle as a member of that "New York School" whose existence, like that of the Mafia, is denied above all by those who are said to belong to it. Towle's tributes to the first three poets are rather formulaic—"I know from Frank O'Hara that the poem and its setting / are completely at your disposal"—but when he comes to speak of Schuyler his language becomes so richly paradoxical that it is clear whose has been the most challenging presence:

> and James Schuyler's blinding exactitude of observation,
> its serene and tremendous burden.

Towle, blinded and burdened, celebrates/laments his double-edged imaginative poverty:

> I am fortunate to know even the alphabet,
> my mind sticking to nothing for very long,
> leafing through some great books, getting up in agitation,
> sitting back down with some paper and life;

—manifesting his sense that his weakness is inseparable from his strength, his "fortune." The disruptive clamor of the mind interrupting itself is both the hunger for poetry and poetry itself. Towle does not scruple to reveal his method: not that careful poetics of attention so admired in Schuyler but what we might call, on the contrary, a poetics of distraction, "mind sticking to nothing for very long," in which thought is not permitted to bind itself to its objects. "One's attention is constantly / being diverted—in both senses of the word," Towle writes in "Summer Solstice," reminding us that he is not above entertaining his readers or himself. Towle's artfully unkempt sentence structure, in which commas and semicolons join/separate clauses whose relations sustain continual modification, is the syntactical correlate for the intentional (and anti-intentional) structure of thinking. When it works (like thinking, it's always threatening not to), the result is a surprising conflation of will and passivity ("the mind of its own tide," as Towle writes in "Starry Night") that refreshes by its startling revelation of the inexhaustibility of vision: "Again and again there is something to see."

It remains to be said of this kind of poetry just how we know when it does work, for its very success can be an undoing of canons of judgment. One mark of Towle's style is his funambulistic ability to maintain a discursive structure in which an inherently ridiculous line like "I pause, and think about the human condition" functions meaningfully. The problem becomes more acute when the poem's structure does not attempt to make such lines plausible, but forces the success of a later moment in the poem to depend upon the failure of the present one. Towle cultivates bathos, the art of sinking, in order to rise the more startlingly. In the long poem "Autobiography," for instance, we read that

> Another possibility is that the universe is a spoon
> of enormous depth,
> stirring an infinite cauldron of soup

which combines the cosmic and the trivial in the most outrageous manner: the reader simply doesn't know what to "do" with such a metaphor, except laugh nervously. The poem goes on to suggest other possibilities, however:

> or a fork
> to prod the roasted planets of gas
> until they break up in hopeless laughter
> and slop over the sides of the universe
> onto the indivisible floor of night;

relieving tension by resolving willful oddity into acknowledged hilarity but also, in the last quoted line, shifting the tone just enough to prevent our getting the bends with the shift into the third metaphor in the series:

> or it is a ladle,
> scattering pinpoints of sensation before your
> eyes in an astounding flood of information
> greeting you suddenly on the return from a walk.

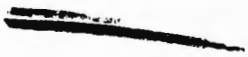
This breakneck modulation into an unaffected yet sublime seriousness, mixing quotidian detail with legendary overtones, is made all the more affective for its bravura demonstration of the poet's virtuosity. If such a passage has any justification aside from the sheer rollercoasterish pleasure of it, this can only be because there is really a kind of goofy sincerity about it, for the passage does convincingly represent the process of an accomplished mind searching for a more adequate figure, and finding it. Towle's silliness is as necessary to, and as distinct from, his sublimity as Buster Keaton's pratfalls are to, and from, his breathtaking grace. In "Vase," the last poem in this volume, Towle speaks of

> your balance,
> thrown off by primroses, asters,
> giant political interests

and if our balance is not disturbed, as by the sudden widening of viewpoint in the move from flowers to politics, the poem has failed to function. More often than not it does function, and the result can be a powerful sense of opening to otherness, to experience if you will:

> I, like a book, have been forced to contain other stories than my own.

BARRY SCHWABSKY



The Full Note: Lorine Niedecker
Edited by Peter Dent
Interim Press, 1983

How shocking to learn in Peter Dent's preface to *The Full Note: Lorine Niedecker* that "in 1966, she could write (to Charles Tomlinson) 'England is dear to my heart—notice of LN so much stronger than in this country,' when the superb Fulcrum Press editions of her work were destined to be pulped...." No wonder *North Central* and *My Life By Water* are impossible to trace and, more important, that attention to her poetry has been minimal. Only one full-length work (a collection of essays and appreciations published as a special issue of *Truck* magazine, 1975) has appeared since her death in 1970. Now from England comes the first *book* on Lorine Niedecker's poetry, giving her the notice that she cherished 20 years ago.

The Full Note is 100 pages densely packed with tributes, critical appraisals, two of her long poems, "Wintergreen Ridge" and "Darwin," and fragments of letters to Cid Corman and Kenneth Cox. The best of the criticism already printed in American and English periodicals finds safekeeping here, thanks to the good judgment of editor, poet, and publisher, Peter Dent.

The survival of Lorine Niedecker's poetry is due almost entirely to the work of poets. Poets first recognized and lauded her. Basil Bunting: "No one is so subtle with so few words"; "One of the finest American poets at all, besides being easily the finest female American poet...LN never fails: whatever she writes is excellent." Gilbert Sorrentino: "...remarkable poetry, as in Catullus and Emily Dickinson." Louis Zukofsky: "I read only two modern women poets, Moore and Niedecker. One feels closer to Niedecker." Peter Yates: "Lorine Niedecker is the most absolute poetess in our language since Emily Dickinson." Poets published her too: Ian Hamilton Finlay's Wild Hawthorne Press published *My Friend Tree*; Cid Corman published most of the poems she wrote in the sixties in *Origin*; Stuart Montgomery published *North Central* and *My Life By Water* for Fulcrum; Jonathan Williams published *T&G* and has recently announced her *Complete Collected Poems.*

Why have the critics been so slow? Kenneth Cox, in a reprinted analysis originally published in *The Cambridge Quarterly* Spring 1969, marvels at her poems where, so often, lucidity defies explication: "It is almost impossible to say how it is done" and "...[the poems] convey a manifold meaning beyond the reach of analysis." Ed Dorn's reprinted introduction to *My Friend Tree* which Ian Hamilton Finlay originally inserted into the volume on a loose sheet "to help readers towards the poems and towards buying," states somewhat shamefacedly before the plain speech of the poems: "I don't 'understand' these poems very well. The 'meanings' are always a little mysterious, to me." (Lorine Niedecker wrote Ian Hamilton Finlay that she didn't understand Dorn's introduction very well!) Jim Burns names his poetic tribute "The Simple Things are Hardest." But, in spite of the challenges posed by her simplicity, *The Full Note* does contain

some excellent criticism—Kenneth Cox and Michael Heller's pieces among its best.

Kenneth Cox was one of many writers who corresponded with Niedecker in the 60's and the selection of extracts from her letters to him makes a revealing companion piece to his essay. Niedecker's isolation in Fort Atkinson, Wisconsin, led her to take advantage of the mail's opportunities—particularly in her sustained and pivotal relationship with Louis Zukofsky. Letters offered her both a full engagement with another consciousness and a model for the scale, voice and diction of her poems. The unstudied talk in letters between friends (co-respondence) is the language of much of her work. "Many of the poems" Kenneth Cox points out, "suppose someone to be saying them.... They catch the inflexion of voice, establishing relations between persons speaking, spoken to and spoken of." Niedecker's letters to friends are quite clearly an essential adjunct to a discussion of her poems. Besides the extracts from her letters to Kenneth Cox (published here for the first time), *The Full Note* includes a selection of extracts from her ten year correspondence with Cid Corman. We can look forward to the publication of Lisa Pater Faranda's fine edition of Niedecker's complete letters to Corman, already excerpted in *Conjunctions* 5.

Niedecker's avid reading of the collected letters of other writers (Henry James, William Morris, Jefferson, Adams, Wallace Stevens, and many more) provided her with a further source for poems. "Darwin" is based largely on letters the itinerant Darwin wrote to his friends and family. "Lake Superior," Donald Davie's subject in his essay "Lorine Niedecker: Lyric Minimum and Epic Scope" published originally in *PN Review* 25, draws uncharacteristically on her reading of *history*. The result is somewhat different from the poems drawn from letters ("Darwin," "Jefferson," "His Carpets Flowered" and others) and may explain why Davie baulks at the forbidding "consistency with which [the poem] proceeds from [its] initial premise." But parts of Davie's essay make it clear that his reading of the poem is too hasty. He complains, amazingly, that "the Indians, the indigenous and original inhabitants of the Lake Superior region, figure in Niedecker's poem nowhere at all, except as the savages who tore out poor Radisson's finger nails" when Indians and whites appear throughout the poem in contexts both good and evil. It's absurd to find a colonialist bias in a poem that so successfully balances a short period of human history beside and against the grand, disinterested scale of natural history.

However, Davie's annotations of "Lake Superior" do convey a sense of the bookishness concealed behind the clear plain speech of her lines. Her scale is intimate—she tackles history but with an eye for the domestic, the private person behind the achievement. Hence her attraction to the incidental history recorded in letters. Here is Part II of "Darwin":

> Cordilleras to climb — Andean
> peaks 'tossed about
> like the crust
> of a broken pie'

Icy wind
        Higher, harder
        Chileans advised eat onions
for shortness of breath

Heavy on him:
        Andes miners carried up
                great loads — not allowed
to stop for breath

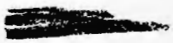
Fossil Bones near Sante Fe
        Spider-bite-scauld
                Fever
    Tended by an old woman

'Dear Susan...
        I am ravenous
                for the sound
    of the pianoforte'

Charles Tomlinson's "Introduction: A Rich Sitter" misleads by invoking Olson and Melville and the vast formative American spaces. Geographic space is not a striking feature of her poems. If anything, her poems explore vertical space: she maintained a steady interest in surrealism and the unconscious; in the later poems she probed geological and etymological accretions. Her native Black Hawk Island ("red-winged blackbirds, willows, maples, boats, fishing [the smell of tarred nets], twittering and squawking noises from the marsh") provides much of her material. Perhaps the strong sense of a circumscribed and dense locality—she left Wisconsin no more than a dozen times in her 67 years—helps to account for her audience amongst British poets. Their scale is similar. Still, it is heartening to find that Charles Tomlinson has here revised his earlier piece, published in *Agenda* in Spring 1969, by adding more poems and removing his early judgment of Niedecker's work as "minor poetry."

Scholars may have been slow to recognize her skill but there has been no lack of poetic tribute. Jonathan Williams gathered thirty poems for *Epitaphs for Lorine* and *Truck* 16 published a further thirteen. The ten short poems in *The Full Note* constitute a fitting homage. I like especially Alan Halsey's "4 Rounds for Springtime" based on Niedecker's "Wallace Stevens," and Jonathan Williams's quirky "6 Misericords for LN in Misericordless Wisconsin." At last some humour has entered the poems written for a poet whose humour (in both senses) is among the strongest reasons to read her.

JENNY PENBERTHY



The Jardin des Plantes
(Postcards)

Dear A, Paris, 9.2.84

Around the *Jardin des Plantes*: boules played in the old Roman space . . . remember? . . . *Arènes de Lutèce,* hidden behind buildings of the Rue Monge; Moufftard and its market (gentrified); or the mosque, where you can still take a steam bath and drink mint tea from gold trays. This year the gardens are lush—blur of blossoms from everyplace, going to seed. People scattered on green chairs observe the plants. And statues: Bernardin de Saint-Pierre smiles down in bluish bronze at the mythic kids, *Paul et Virginie.* Buffon, his back to everyone: a pigeon twitches on his metal head. Over near the menagerie and the Seine Lamarck in an attitude of thought—above a rising sun (of science? nature?). See you at the end of the month . . .

Dear P, 9.3.84

NATURE/CULTURE NATURE/CULTURE NATURE/CULTURE: It's still the most beautiful, intense, funny, etc. exhibit in Paris: "Les Plus Beaux Insectes du Monde," Institute of Entomology, Rue Buffon, afternoons. One bright room . . . pinned fireworks, faces, masks, eyes, bones, skin, then suddenly four exactly torn leaves (with antennae), a band of *tricolores,* the dusty subtlety of moths (Braque, Klee), touched up, sprayed, day-glo, lacquer, ceramic, microchip. . . . a laughter of classifications: Bougainville, Borneo, Sumatra, Java; with wings, without wings; "Hercules," gold metal, blackblue, neongreen . . . NO UNNATURAL color, shape, thought. Or—the inventive mind *is* nature. Levi-Strauss knows this exhibit. Didn't he write somewhere that modern art should be inspired by butterflies, not Picasso?

Dear S, 9.4.84

A tall tree, SOPHORA JAPONICA, planted by B. Jussieu, 1747, in the *Jardin du Roy,* seed sent from China by R. P. d'Incarville, . . . or another, brought from "The Levant." Strange beings, *alive and historical* (not at all like those sequoia rings with dates written on, 1492, 1776, 1914, or "the bed Napoleon slept in"). They're in planetary/human time and space, but with a tempo we can't sustain—the Age of Discovery present in a "life," transplanted by history. Outliving us. By the way there's a new bookstore with a pretty good poetry section, Moufftard and Pot de Fer: "L'Arbre Voyageur." Will you be passing through California in the Winter?

Dear T, 9.5.84

Inhuman *Robinsonade*—

ROBINIER de ROBIN (Robina Pseudo Accacia Linné)

Premier sujet introduit en Europe à partir des graines provenant d'AMERIQUE du NORD par Jean ROBIN dans son jardin de la place Dauphine en 1601. Transplanté en ce lieu du Jardin du Roy en 1636 par Vespasier ROBIN fils du précedent.

Dear B, 9.6.84

You won't have forgotten the fantastic, long, dappled alleyways of *Tilleul.* But maybe you didn't see a little rock garden where they cultivate shrubs, flowers, cacti, and herbs from China, the Caucasus, Corsica, New Zealand, Morocco, the Himalayas, Pyrenées, Balkans, Arctic, Japan.... Continents beside each other in hundreds of beds. In a corner the low trunk, supported by a post; the path ducks under:

> "PISTACHER (Pistacia Vera L.)
> Planted in the seedling garden around 1700
> (the present Alpine Garden).
> Permitted Sebastien Vaillant to discover the
> sexuality of plants in 1716."

So what's become of M. Vaillant? Or the sexuality of plants? The permissive little pistachio lives on. With love...

Dear N, 9.7.84

"Primitive" painting by Haitians is a recent avocation. (But you know all about this.) And they took to it so "naturally." One of their models: Henri Rousseau. A friend tells me he once saw a Haitian artist painting complex forests of "Guinée" (the place of mythic and historical origin) with Rousseau reproductions at hand. There are no African jungles in Haiti. And the Douanier hadn't seen any either, but copied his from specimens at the *Jardin des Plantes.* Right now I'm looking in at the entrance to one of the tall greenhouses, dreamlike. A tiger? Behind reflecting panes the fabulous, sharp, sagging leaves.... Fable of our "Caribbean" selves.

Dear L, 9.8.84

About the view from your hotel, Rue Linné.... I can imagine the ivy-drenched gate of the *Jardin,* and within, dark walls of the "Labyrinth" (I recall rising circular paths, assignations, strange faces passing...). Another garden. And isn't this near the great Cedar of Lebanon where around 1860 (in an old print) people with top hats and long dresses strolled to admire its superb, spreading form and to marvel at the gathered, imperial universe? They must have heard, as one still can, noises from the menagerie—animals that, some years later in a hard winter, would be eaten by beseiged citizens of the Commune. Please stay in touch.

Dear J, 9.9.84

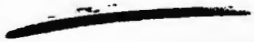
Paris of the *rentrée*: streets filling again, tempo picking up. The sun gives off a low artificial light. In the *Jardin des Plantes* they're building a new "Zoothèque," largely underground. Pruning has begun. Contemplating winter, I'm infatuated again with the palms of the Luxemburg Gardens ("Autour d'une meme place/l'ample palme ne se lasse...") symmetrical, perfect, rooted in boxes on iron legs. Vegetable extraterrestrials, six inches of air between their earth and the path...

Addendum

Dear K, 10.7.84

Thanks for sending me the new book by Alicia Dujovne Ortiz, *Buenos Aires.* It's beautiful. One of those miracles of travel, of the *"vertige horizontal."* Jews from Moldavia marrying Argentinians (immigrants: Spanish, Italian, Albanian...), then a daughter: *porteña,* but living in Paris, writing French, remembering the impossible home. I like her glimpses of Borges and the social "physiology" of the tango. Also, especially, her love for the city's *Jardin Botanico*—its giant plants visited by cats and old women with bags of liver. The zoo: animals "covered by a greenish moss, but living in splendid buildings, absurd, feverish products of a demented architect. This hindu palace inhabited by a dusty elephant...." Portrait of a transplanted civilization. "But if I have no roots, why have my roots hurt me like this?"

JAMES CLIFFORD



The Earth as Air
GUSTAF SOBIN
New Directions, 1984

Gustaf Sobin's new collection of poems, *The Earth As Air* takes for its subject the texture and nuance of landscapes both geographic and phonetic. The book's title could easily be read as an alchemical conceit distilling this ambitious poet's task: the fusing of the tangible world and its thin as air mirror—language. Sobin has set about "emptying earth into air..." in order to "twist out of quick syllables, the wings, the wing beaten forms we'd give to the inadmissible shape."

But in these poems the merging of the observed object and its name is accomplished far more directly than in most traditional nature poetry. Moments of transcendence in such poems are reached by way of complex narrative assembly and then only glimpsed obliquely. In Sobin's work, however, we are, from the very first line, at the point of arrival, on a heightened perceptual plane where

we feel "the created, at last, syncretic with creation." There is none of Wordsworth's "emotion recollected in tranquillity" here; each poem begins at full pitch and the confluence of sheer geography and language always seems imminent. Poems that take a more conventional, reflective turn also tend to provide epiphanies charged precisely to the extent of the poet's participation, while Sobin prefers to keep his distance "sending, instead of ourselves, our syllables." As a result he has crafted an austere verse, free of biographical particulars and the baggage of attitude.

In this book as well as his two previous volumes, *The Wind's Chrysalid Rattle* and *Celebration of the Sound Through,* Sobin demonstrates his affinity for Olson's sense of line/breath and the synesthetic imagery of such French surrealists as Rene Char. His structural techniques are those of field composition and his vocabulary reminds me of Bonnefoy or Char in its deliberately limited breadth and elemental character. Yet these sources have been rigorously reworked and filtered through a razor-edged sensibility to produce a style in which surrealist imagery is imbued with a pointed logic and the directness of Olson's meter has been paired down, made even denser:

> . . . blown snows
> lacing the
> high precipices, Robion
> ocherous, beneath, I
> blew the
>
> lamb-
> transparent, in
> loose
>
> ripples, before me . . . (p. 12)

The syntax in this passge is compact; each line appears to have been hammered into place. Rhythmic units develop syllable by syllable, a telegraphic progression that positions our attention on individual images, individual sounds. The luxuriant quality of the first stanza, even the first line ". . . blown snows," requires a pause, its own moment of absorption, to allow the words to "swell to their sounds." Although the lines are clipped, some barely more than a syllable, a gem-like hardness and clarity sustains their vitality. By skillfully deploying his punctuation—dashes, ellipses, broken syllabification, parentheses, and especially commas, Sobin enhances this crystalline effect:

> . . . no
> heaven, and
> scarce-
>
> ly an
> earth, a-
> wash in that last echo: a
> mouth, at

twists
to the fold of a shoulder. (p. 25)

Since each line resonates to its full tether, there is little discursive momentum. Nevertheless the advance of poetic thought remains determined, movement being made "atomically, by the poems's vibration." Hence these landscapes come together less as organized depiction than as an accumulation of incremental flashes of essence. Designed to flex outward from minute, architecturally shaped images, the poems can chart the curious process of visual intelligence; how we come to know what we see.

Every landscape artist, poet or painter, must reconcile the demands of careful observation and lyrical exercise. Sobin's solution is to provide a lyricism that isn't an embellishment of what is seen, but rather a matter of intense telescopic focus. Things are looked at so closely, so steadily that their attachment to reality is constantly in question; the images tease at the edges of metaphor. In the poem "Cardplayers, Cavaillon" we watch a cardgame through a very selective aperture:

for tiny
sums, the

hearts
slip...

(smooth
knuckles,
erratic

thumbs...)

...each
hand

narrowing
fans

out, folds

back, deals (p. 15)

Certainly we *see* everything, but the poet has cut away all but the most suggestive, microcosmic gestures: "knuckles erratic," "...each hand narrowing." (In another poem Sobin has quoted Mallarmé's claim, "everything I've created has been by elimination.") At work is a technique of disjuncture; an eye that partitions the scene into a series of discrete, highly defined movements. This fragmented vision gives us images that, by virtue of their scrutiny in isolation, acquire an elusiveness and paradoxically, a palpability similar to what I find in the T'ang lyrics of Li Po. The lyrical achievement then, for Sobin, lies in his calling our attention to the definite existence of things while simultaneously, as with "hearts slip," affirming their completeness as transient linguistic devices.

Choosing to work the grey zone between an articulated foreground of things and the diffuse, uncertain realm of language, Sobin relies on some of the philosophic thought of Wittgenstein and Quine. However, the poems do not take up the issue of words and things as exclusive domains in any systematic way. His discourse, instead, is symbolist in character, an attempt to suggest and transcend dialectical concerns and relationships through the use of imagistic insights. Such images, if powerful enough, generate their own context, flesh out their argument and thus the whole is received through the particular. An excerpt from the poem "Manna" illustrates the method:

all day, in the
  gorges, the sun fell
in pinched
showers,
pale

e-
longated sparks
gathered

what I'd

found: the
gold-eyed sporangia: the
self-

combusting,
dust, the
dry

foam of some other, some
yet-un-
engendered world! (p. 69)

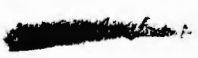
Much of the tension in this lean column of stanzas derives from what is essentially a form and content question: taut, unbendable lines suggesting confinement while clearly carrying a message of discovery and outwardness. Within such abbreviated, sometimes abrupt constructions, Sobin finds the perfect format for exploring language's ability to push out of itself and into experience, into things themselves.

The chopping of e-longated is a bit of trickery that successfully expands and reveals the word's phonic operation and invites us to recline over the space of two lines in the lengthening of the "sparks." By placing the usually static article "the" at the end of lines in the third and fourth stanzas, Sobin directs us to the word's capacity as a namer and infuses it with a sense of expectation. The two propositions of closure and exstasis can be found agilely balanced in the image of sunlight falling "in pinched showers." From line to line, every word in the poem presses beyond itself and seeks to move freely through the neutral grey.

In his dedication to repeated "high points," Sobin does run the risk of

diluting those moments of exceptional quality. Generally, though, his inventive abilities have been made to serve the poems' larger structural interests. But still he is a poet with a keen and elegant sense of the isolated frieze. In the book's final section, an ars poetics that shares the book's title, Sobin says "poetry is passage . . . an equipoise in motion" accomplishing its ends "by juxtaposing syllable, word, word-cluster in a harmonious tension." It is just this concentration on the energy inherent in individual words and phrases which enables these poems to unwind our habits of seeing and remake our conception of what language can do.

ALBERT MOBILIO



Poetry and the Common Life

At the recent Alabama Symposium, "What Is A Poet?" Louis Simpson delivered a polemic lecture on Poetry and the Common Life. As is usual on such occasions, Simpson invoked Wordsworth's 1800 "Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads,*" with its famous formulation that the poet "is a man speaking to men," and he decried the excessively arcane and artificial poetry of John Ashbery, James Merrill and, yes, Wallace Stevens (!)—poets presumably too far removed from what Wordsworth called "a selection of language really used by men." The audience, evidently tired of teasing out the difficult meanings in "Self-Portrait in a Complex Mirror" or *The Changing Light at Sandover,* applauded.

But what *is* the relationship of poetry to the common life? In the Fall 1984 issue of the *Georgia Review,* which appeared in print just as we were considering the nature of poetry in Alabama, Louis Simpson has a poem called "26th Precinct Station":

> One night Jake telephoned
> to say, "Mike has stabbed Lorna."
> He wanted me to call his lawyer . . .
> couldn't do it himself, he was tied up.
>
> I called the lawyer, who had just come in
> from seeing *Kismet.* We shared a taxi.
> All the way down to the station
> he kept humming "And This is My Beloved."
>
> Lorna recovered, and wrote a novel.
> Mike married and went to live in Rome.
> Jake Harmon died. But I remember
> the 26th Precinct Station.

A black woman in a yellow wig,
a purple skirt, and stiletto heels;
a pickpocket; a cripple
arrested for indecent exposure.

The naked light bulb; the crack in the wall
that loops like the Mississippi at Vicksburg;
the shadow of the cockroach
under the baseboard, lurking, gathering his nerve.

This is the common life, alright, as the poem's flat free verse, its ordinary speech, its dry reportage ("One night Jake telephoned . . .") of everyday incidents in the police precinct informs us. Its claim to being a poem, I suppose, is that its prose rhythms ("Lorna recovered, and wrote a novel") are organized into four-line stanzas. And further: that the narrator is presumably, in Wordsworth's words, "endowed with more lively sensibility" than Jake or Mike or Lorna or that crass lawyer who hums "And This is My Beloved" in the taxi. It is the narrator who *sees* the awfulness of it all, the "black woman in a yellow wig, a purple skirt, and stiletto heels" (how degraded can you get?), sees the pickpocket and the cripple by the illumination of the "naked light bulb." And where there is a naked light bulbk, there is sure to be a "crack in the wall" and "the shadow of the cockroach under the baseboard, lurking, gathering his nerve." The poet who has, according to Wordsworth, "a disposition to be affected more than other men by absent things as if they were present," is here presented as one who "remember[s] / the 16th Precinct Station," that microcosm of the hideousness and banality of Modern Life. And so on.

The difficulty with poems like "26th Precinct Station" is that the poet's stance toward the "common life" is no more than a series of reflexes. The "I," far from immersing himself in the lives of Mike and Lorna, far from trying to understand what motivates the black woman in her vulgar purple skirt and stiletto heels, stands *outside* the scene, a knowing and worldly-wise commentator. "Reader," the poet implies, "you and I understand how tawdry it all is! We, unlike them, know all about those cockroaches."

I cite this particular travesty of the "poetry of the common life," only to come back to the real thing. New Directions has just published the *Selected Poems* of Kenneth Rexroth, edited with an excellent, if too brief, introduction by Bradford Morrow. Unlike Simpson and so many other contemporary poets who are always invoking Wordsworth's name so as to defend what they take to be the "naturalness" of their own verse, Rexroth really did write his poems as "a man speaking to men." So deceptive is that speaking that Rexroth remains, as Elliot Weinberger put it in these pages in his 1982 obituary, "among the best known and least read of American poets." Patronized by the *New Yorker* as "Daddy-o," by the *New York Times* as the "Father Figure to Beat Poets," and by Alfred Kazin as an "old-fashioned American sorehead," Rexroth is vaguely associated in the minds of today's poetry audience with West Coast versions of Buddhism, left-wing politics, erotic translations from the Chinese and Japanese,

and a cracker-barrel crankiness, reenforced by years of isolation in the Far West.

The best way to avoid these stereotypes is to look closely at the poems. Here is "A Dialogue of Watching," one of the seven poems "For Marthe, My Wife" from *In Defense of the Earth* (1956):

> Let me celebrate you. I
> Have never known anyone
> More beautiful than you. I
> Walking beside you, watching
> You move beside me, watching
> That still grace of hand and thigh,
> Watching your face change with words
> You do not say, watching your
> Solemn eyes as they turn to me,
> Or turn inward, full of knowing,
> Slow or quick, watching your full
> Lips part and smile or turn grave,
> Watching your narrow waist, your
> Proud buttocks in their grace, like
> A sailing swan, an animal,
> Free, your own, and never
> To be subjugated, but
> Abandoned, as I am to you,
> Overhearing your perfect
> Speech of motion, of love and
> Trust and security as
> You feed or play with our children.
> I have never known any
> One more beautiful than you. (p. 83)

This poem dates from what Robert Lowell was to call "the tranquillized fifties," the moment when the New Criticism was at its height. Compared to, say, Lowell's own "Man and Wife" ("Tamed by *Miltown,* we lie on Mother's bed..."), it may well seem too casual, too purely mimetic—the mere record of what Rexroth might actually say to the woman he loved. R. P. Blackmur would surely have dismissed it, as he dismissed D. H. Lawrence's *Look We Have Come Through*! sequence, as suffering from "the fallacy of expressive form." After all, isn't "I / Have never known anyone / More beautiful than you," just prose statement? Where does the poet exhibit a command of metaphor? Of the telling image or symbol?

"A Dialogue of Watching" is written in syllabics. All but six of its 24 lines have seven syllables, and once this norm has been established, the variation (6 or 8 syllables) is used for particular effect— a plenitude, say, as in "Solemn eyes as they turn to me," or a sense of pause as in "Free, your own, and never," where the two caesuras mark musical rests. Within this framework, the lines are run on, a series of gerund phrases beginning with "Watching." The use of "you. I," followed by a break in both lines 1 and 3, immediately creates an air of suspense, of breathlessness—in the context, almost of orgasm.

And yet—and here is the complexity behind the seeming ease—the poet's celebration of his wife occurs in the context, not of making love, but of a certain distance, as he watches her walk, talk, move about the room, "feed or play with our children." The lovers' union, it would seem, is never quite complete; always, even at their most intimate moments, there is a sense of separation. Or, to turn it around, even when he is acutely aware of his separateness, the poet is obsessed by Marthe's presence. This duality is summed up in the poem's title: it is a "dialogue" but the word "watching" implies that the poet also stands *outside* the experience of the other, that he can never quite possess it.

"Watching" appears six times in the first thirteen lines of the poem, its position within the line changing each time. This change in linear position regularly signals a change in perspective: the poet's eye focuses first on Marthe's whole body ("You move beside me"; "That still grace of hand and thigh"), then downward from "your face chang[ing] with words," to "Solemn eyes," "full lips," "narrow waist," "Proud buttocks in their grace, like / A sailing swan."

Here, at the only point of metaphor in the poem, the tension between separation and union comes to a height. The animal freedom of the woman's beautiful body is "never / To be subjugated. And the word "Abandoned," seemingly in apposition to "Subjugated" and hence referring to Marthe, now loops back so as to challenge the observer:

> but
> Abandoned, as I am to you,
> Overhearing your perfect
> Speech of motion....

It is now the poet who is "Abandoned... to you," which is to say, totally hers but also lost. Hence he doesn't so much "hear" her "perfect / Speech of motion" as "Overhear" it; her speech is not directed to him. By the time the refrain returns "I have never known any / One more beautiful than you" "anyone" (line 2) has split into two halves. Like the love lyrics of Catullus or Herrick ("When as in silks my Julia goes"), Rexroth's "celebration" has an elegiac edge.

Complex as the poem is (and something should also be said of Rexroth's sound repetitions like "Walking... watching," "grace" / "face," "Watching ... waist," and the assonance throughout of short and long *a*'s), it appears wholly natural, a poem anyone can read and enjoy. In Beckett's words, "No symbols where none intended." And no literary allusions or mythic references, or foreign phrases. Rexroth's is a simulation of "the language really used by men." In poem after poem, this "direct treatment of the thing" arrests our attention, and only on a second or third reading, do we notice that the "direct treatment" is in fact very odd. In "Marthe Away (She Is Away)," for example, an intense eroticism is qualified by the elegiac reference to "the deep still / Communion I am not always strong / Enough to take from you waking, the peace of love" (p. 82). Must the poet's wife be asleep in order to satisfy his love?

Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard are sweeter. In an exquisite early poem called "Autumn in California" (1940), the poet takes in the "anony-

mous" and "colorless" landscape of the season, a landscape, like that of "Tintern Abbey," where no object stands out sharply, where, on the contrary, "the fields are plowed, bare, waiting" (p. 3). It is precisely in this blank and comfortable setting that the observer's consciousness is flooded by images of war and terror, of "the clocks in Barcelona [that] strike at dawn / And the whistles blowing for noon in Nanking." The autumnal California landscape, with its "sooty green / Eucalyptus," and bare pastures, gives way to the mental landscape of "a closed room in Madrid," of soldiers talking of "Women they might have had or almost had," even as "The candlelight reddens" and "the bombardment / Begins again." By the time the poem circles back to the present, with its "Brown fog spread[ing] over the bay from the marshes," and its moon rising late "over Mt. Diablo," the solitude and silence of the California hills is charged with terror.

A terror, we might note, that has little in common with the willed dismay expressed by the speaker of Louis Simpson's "26th Precinct Station." A man (or a woman) speaking *to* men and women, not speaking *at* them—this is the secret of the "poetry of the common life" to which poets like Louis Simpson pay lip service. One of Rexroth's finest volumes of poetry is called "The Signatures of All Things" (1950). Here, to conclude, is a sample lyric from that volume:

> When I dragged the rotten log
> From the bottom of the pool,
> It seemed heavy as stone.
> I let it lie in the sun
> For a month; and then chopped it
> Into sections, and split them
> For kindling, and spread them out
> To dry some more. Late that night,
> After reading for hours,
> While moths rattled at the lamp—
> The saints and the philosophers
> On the destiny of man—
> I went out on my cabin porch,
> And looked up through the black forest
> At the swaying islands of stars.
> Suddenly I saw at my feet,
> Spread on the floor of night, ingots
> Of quivering phosphorescence,
> And all about were scattered chips
> Of pale cold light that was alive. (p. 44)

To gather those "scattered chips / of pale cold light," to recognize that the light is "alive"—it is this metamorphosis of the empirical, the "common life," that is Rexroth's own "signature."

MARJORIE PERLOFF

Roman Jakobson

Interviewed by David Shapiro
(June, 1979)

D.S. Arthur Cohen has at *Ex Libris* a little book of your beautiful sound or *zaum* poetry.

Jakobson: Yes, I was impressed that in the catalogue it costs eight thousand dollars! (Laughter)

DS: Were you inspired by Rodchenko?

Jakobson: I cannot say I was inspired by him, because this booklet is much earlier than my meeting with Rodchenko, and I think Rodchenko's activities are later. My book states that it was written in 1916 but factually it was written in 1914. Written in 1914, published in 1915, but the publishers wanted to present it as *completely new.*

DS: Should we assign a referential content to Malevitch's squares and colors?

Jakobson: No, no, nonsense. I believe all these things were done before the revolution, and the red played a great role before the revolution and independent of the revolution and nobody—nobody of those who saw it had the slightest idea of that. Of course all that remains is the relation between white and black that was here and the relation of white and black versus the red. Of course, the pictures have—I would say—their semantics. It is the experience, colors, in connection with certain emotions and ideas. This is clear. For instance, in Sweden a big monograph appeared on the three colors: red, white and black—in primitive patterns. And color, of course, has its semantic pattern. But this is another thing that colors evoke—the relations evoke certain semantic contracts. And there is a very powerful relation which is now seen more exactly with every step, with every investigation. And this is the question of the synaesthetic relation between the sounds and colors. And this exists, it is a fact that can be motivated by neuroses. There is this problem of the neuroses. Now, for instance, in the works of Dora Vallier in Paris, the relation of colors and sounds are shown and also the semantic content of such elements as rising points and falling points, left and right, vertical and horizontal, and so on. I think this is the big field now and interesting for art, for the study of those elementary, ultimate constituents of art.

DS: If language can provoke synaesthetic responses, is the collaboration of poets and painters, say Mayakovsky and El Lissitzky, redundant in a sense?

Jakobson: Yes, but all this is completely subliminal, subconscious. No, no. These questions are discussed in my book, by me and one of my collaborators, Linda Waugh: *The Sound Shape of Language.* Well, you know, the question of the inter-relation of—let us say—music, poetry and colors, a typical representative of this somewhat earlier was Scriabin. He made experiments in this which at the time were technically very naive. Now it could be done much better. On the

other hand, I'm not sure that he was really realizing the actual inter-relations between these things; it was really impressionistic. But in general this brought about the synthesis of the arts, though I would not see here some great endeavors, great attempts.

DS: And the hagiography of Klebnikov, often presented as a kind of wandering saint or Hungerkunstler?

Jakobson: Yes, he had many of these ideas. In the last issue of the journal which appears in Russian in Moscow, "Questions of Literature," there is a paper about Klebnikov, where it shows what he saw as the question of art and culture of the future, and there are very interesting conclusions.

DS: Do you include Pasternak as a worker in this synaesthetic field?

Jakobson: No, no, he was not. He was very interested in the relation between music and poetry: this, yes. He states this. But I must say it's very peculiar that Pasternak says several times in *My Poetics* that he doesn't understand Klebnikov. You know, he was very much bound to poetry in a certain traditional way. But his originality was syntactic, the originality was in the construction of images, in the utilization of such figures between sound and meaning.

But at the same time, there was a certain conservatism (in Pasternak). He almost does not have poems in any free rhythms. He uses traditional verse written with certain few innovations. He uses traditional rhyme, and so on.

DS: But you have praised the metonymic distortions in *Safe Conduct*?

Jakobson: Yes, but this is a question in the field of semantics, yes. I must confess, I am not—I have not a very high opinion about *Dr. Zhivago*. For me, Pasternak is much stronger Pasternak in his poetry. And Pasternak in his early prose through the twenties and early thirties. Here in *Zhivago* he wanted to become very ideological, and ideological in a rather conservative sense. Not conservative ideology, but conservative form of presentation of ideology. You agree, no?

DS: I am interested in its lyric condensation, the snow falling through its heroic, formal obsessions, and its political courage.

Jakobson: Pasternak remains Pasternak, but we come, speaking of Braque that I quote so much: we are interested in the relations. And the relations between these earlier works and later works. He is still showing so many possibilities in his earlier works. These then disappeared. Why? There are various reasons, both social and personal. I would say, for me his early works are the more impressive.

DS: And his critique of Mayakovsky's Romantic, suicidal syntax?

Jakobson: Yes, but look: compare two biographies of Mayakovsky or two views of Mayakovsky by Pasternak. That view of Mayakovsky he had when he wrote his book of the early thirties immediately after the suicide of Mayakovsky and then at the end of his life. It is clear that he tries to rebuild his old past. He tries to

present his artistic and personal life differently than it was.

And then his fear, his fear of not being understood, his fear of being too complicated, and so on. I would say this is already a kind of tiredness. It is already, if you would like to use a stereotype, it is already the end...

When he went to a congress, from Moscow to Paris, he didn't visit his parents. There was a certain artistic and not only artistic conflict. Yes, yes, Pasternak had a very strong return to the past and a strong denial of his own past, a cancellation of his own past. He says, No, this was not important; it's not there; it was not real; and so on. You know, that is very peculiar on his part: Pasternak, and it is not by chance, Pasternak in his first steps was still much closer to symbolism and to the tradition than was the case of Klebnikov or Mayakovsky.

DS: And this is another reason for you to dispute the finding of a symbolic code in cubo-futurist art?

Jakobson: Yes, absurd, this is nonsense. It is exactly the same as when they look for, in the name of Pasternak, some cheap allegories and so on.

DS: Dr. Zhivago—Dr Life?

Jakobson: Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes. Nonsense!

DS: What about the influence of Mallarmé and Rimbaud on your circle?

Jakobson: Mallarmé, yes. *Un Coup de Dés* was not very well known. Mallarmé's poems, Mallarmé's prose, Mallarmé's theoretical declarations, yes. But *Un Coup de Dés*: I don't remember a single discussion in my presence. Rimbaud and "Les Voyelles" were much better known. "Les Voyelles" is one of the poorest examples of synaesthesia because the colors derive from letters in the little ABC book. It was conventional, completely conventional. It was surprising because you see, there in the same poem, Rimbaud says directly—I forget the words—that it is completely the opposite of reality.

DS: And the satirical, Gogolesque forms of cubofuturism?

Jakobson: Oh, yes, yes, the satirical element was there. I would say the satirical element in the sense of Gogol. It is, so to speak, a grotesque view of reality. It is grotesque, and this grotesque is strongly developed in the folklore tradition, in Gogol's tradition, which is the tradition of Russian literature; and you find it in the most unexpected corners. For instance, now when I wrote about *zaum* in the work of Turgenev, about the elements in Turgenev where it seems rare. Read now the French fairy tales which Turgenev wrote and sent to a young lady, which was very recently published. It is complete, and has such a degree of the grotesque that one is surprised at Turgenev. They are not very dense, he calls them *contes* in French, but they are such grotesque novelettes. Very pornographic, absolutely pornographic, you know, and very peculiar.

DS: Let us return to the emotive forms of abstract art.

Jakobson: In Gabo there is a book where he shows that non-representational art is very emotional. And you see, this is the new emotional, the neurotic element of the work. But in Malevitch, I don't see it. I think it is of pure relations. And Malevitch is very peculiar: his place is very separate from others. He was not the first non-representative painter, there were a few before the first war.

DS: Would you define the abstract in art by analogy to the poetic in your formulation in "Linguistics and Poetics?"

Jakobson: Yes, changing certain elements, because it is still, you see, speaking in terms of Charles Sanders Peirce, in language what is pre-dominant is the symbol, in Peirce's sense of the word. In painting it is the icon. What does it mean: the symbolic icon? But still, as a matter of fact, if you take the "degrees" it is different. Therefore, an iconic art such as painting transposed into the field of an abstract art is something different than it is with poetry.

DS: Does this transposition remain as a constant tension for you in an abstract art, denying part of its iconicity?

Jakobson: I would say, yes, that the tension exists. When I was a very young boy, I remember, I was, I think, still in high school, and I had a very large correspondence with Krucenik. My letters to Kru-ce-nik are preserved. His letters to me are lost, but I remember how he wrote me once. He wrote that this abstract *zaum* poetry is a very important thing, but that it is mustard and that you cannot eat only mustard. You see this is very good, and this concerns both poetry and painting. You see, and especially in poetry, we feel always this near to the words, these elements of *zaum* poetry, and yet...

DS: But you do not respect the sociological or "realist" critics who demand a mimetic art.

Jakobson: First, the word, in my vocabulary, there is no such word as "Must." No "must." It is "must represent"—Boring! If something exists, if there exists a non-representative art, how can you say "must"? "Must" from the point of view of the aesthetics of that particular critic we are not interested in. And I would say the same if you said it in the opposite way: "must" be abstract also. There is a place for both, if you want. There is a place for mustard and for other components of our culinary art.

I would say I grew up among painters. I grew up not among poets, not among scholars, but among painters, by chance; it was completely by chance. I was introduced to other painters before scholars or poets. And I remember them discussing this transition, not from realistic painting but from impressionistic painting. To Primitivism and Abstraction. I remember I saw them painting these things.

And when we were in 1967 or 6 my wife and I, in the Congress at Moscow, there was the possibility suddenly for my wife to go with some friends and be admitted

to see certain paintings of the Russian avant-garde which were in Tretyakov's Gallery down there—the *souterrain*. And I could not go because I had to preside at a meeting. And the young man who was showing these paintings to my wife said: "Why didn't your husband come?" He knew me, not personally but from my papers. "He would be interested." "He cannot come; he is sad." I called up, and he said he had been involved in a great scandal by permitting my wife to see the paintings. Then I said, Call up the man in the Ministry on whom it depends. I called. The man said, Look, the Gallery of Tretyakov is *so vast*. You can see so many things there. Yes, I said, but remember: I saw them before you were born. Yes, he said, but what about the Soviet art? Oh, I said, But you see, I am interested in the experimental art, and I didn't find it in the section of Soviet art. It *is* a scandal. You see, sometimes they sell them, they give them to some foreigners who need them sometimes, but only in rare cases. Who knows, who knows? Suddenly now in London there appears a painting in the Museum, this year, a painting of Malevitch which was known to be in the Tretyakov Gallery. How it came there is another question. It's beautiful! If you are ever in London, go there.

DS: Did you know Kandinsky?

Jakobson: Yes, you see, at certain times I was the so-called Secretary of the Visual Arts of the Ministry of the Commissariat of Education. It was at the beginning of 1919. Brik invited me and I needed money and I was there. And there I met various people, and I met Kandinsky there. He was the head of the Section of Publications. And once I remember—this was a typical case—there was a plan to make an introduction to the various problems of painting, an introduction to the science of painting. And they asked, "Would you like to write something?" And I said, "Yes, the Semantics of Painting." And there were various painters there, and they said, "What is semantics?" And Kandinsky gave a very clear exposition...

DS: At a time when your work in poetics is hastily applied to so many other arts, how do we work with arts whose structural divisions are essentially non-linguistic?

Jakobson: A very good question. I think that once in one of my papers I quote the statement, "What a pity that in the visual question you have no phonemes or distinctive features." But, as a matter of fact, the situation is not so tragic. What Dora Vallier shows is how the elementary lines, the elementary main colors, and so on, present patterns and systems similar to the systems of distinctive features and are phonemes in language. She utilizes very much my studies in linguistics and not only mine but modern linguistics in general. And the results are very interesting. You can then characterize a certain painter according to the type of lines he has, how they work and especially their inter-relations. You see, I would say whether we make linguistics a study apart or in general study in many fields of humanities, this must be our slogan, and the slogan is from a paper of Edward Sapir of 1924, "The Grammarian and his Language," in which Sapir says:

"What fetters the mind and benumbs the spirit is ever the dogged acceptance of absolutes."

It's amazing how Dora Vallier does it. I went with her to the Museum; we looked at this and so on and so on, and you will see how for this painting and for this painter, in general what is characteristic, what are for him the leading elements, the leading units, and the art of combining them. I was very impressed, I must say, and also Lévi-Strauss, when he saw her studies.

DS: You have raised structural analogues in your subtle essay on the poet-painters, Klee, Rousseau, Blake.

Jakobson: Yes, but I didn't go as far as she does. I proposed certain things there, yes, and I think it is useful. In general, you see, I am always for inter-departmental studies, for the interdisciplinary. I am now trying to combine work in different departments of Harvard and between Harvard and MIT, and now the last wall is between the Harvard Humanities and the Medical School. And I am now finding ways in the Medical School in questions of the brain which we need very much, and in new discoveries—how we can explain, in terms of brain, various problems of pattern and language.

DS: What is your sense now of Eisenstein, the theory of montage, in relation to your theory of equivalence in the axis of the poetic?

Jakobson: The great linguist who works on Eisenstein, and who published a number of things, but whose monographs have still not appeared in Russia, is Ivanov. And Ivanov shows how Eisenstein is not only an enormous innovator in film but an enormous theoretician, who understood a lot of problems in his wonderful, theoretical studies.

I now agree with those who declare that there is no system without changes. Change is a constituent element of the system. I don't oppose the system as such but static theories. Changes are already within the system. I call this "dynamic synchrony."

DS: And the Italian futurist dream of representing speed: Does painting doom itself by representing change too explicitly?

Jakobson: Well, it is an interesting experiment. I would not say, as they would: You must present horses with hundreds of legs. I would say, No, I don't, not with a MUST. But it's an interesting experiment, it's interesting to adapt.... Of course, it is absurd, it is not a question of topics, as Marinetti thought it was. Yes, he was a very peculiar man. I must say, in painting there were interesting things in Italian futurism, in poetry not much. But Italian futurism is a very important phenomenon.

DS: To what do you compare the syntactical fury of Mayakovsky in Russian art? el Lissitsky? Tatlin?

Jakobson: Mayakovsky very much liked Lissitsky. Well, you must see it against the background. He liked it against the background of traditional editions. And they were bogus. The joke of Mayakovsky when he came to the publishing house of the State was, "Even Pushkin would publish better things and better than you do." But Rodchenko, with his edition of "About This"—his photomontages—this is very close to Mayakovsky.

I remember how Mayakovsky listened to my paper about Klebnikov and made remarks about it. And this remark, which I have quoted sometimes. We discussed epithets in the circle. And he said, Well, what adjective is an epithet in poetry and what is not? And he said, Every adjective when it is in poetry by this means becomes an epithet. And if you say *Rive gauche* it is an epithet as soon as it is in poetry because poetry gives the accent. Mayakovsky had a very remarkable understanding.

DS: What do you make of a political characterization, say that the contemporary American O'Hara is a revolutionary poet without a revolution?

Jakobson: No, no. Politics is part of the poetry: the political background, the general background is part of the work. Always according to the Russian folk expression, you dance from a corner. The importance is from where you dance, from where you dance!

May I introduce Mrs. Jakobson—Professor and Mrs. Shapiro, we are having an interesting conversation on everything.

Mrs. Jakobson: On everything. That's too much for me!

Jakobson: On Constructivism, on how art can be compared, Russian and American art, and so on.

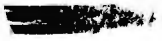
Mrs. Jakobson: *Tiens, tiens,* I missed something!

DS: A last terminological question. Some of us are depressed by the vagaries of a term such as "post-modern" used in so many ways, some dogmatic, some permissive?

Jakobson: I try not to use even Modernism, because what is Modernism, it depends on who writes it and at what moment!

DS: And why did you use a pseudonym in your poetry?

Jakobson: I was in the high school when I did that, and I used it because it was completely forbidden in high school. There was censorship!



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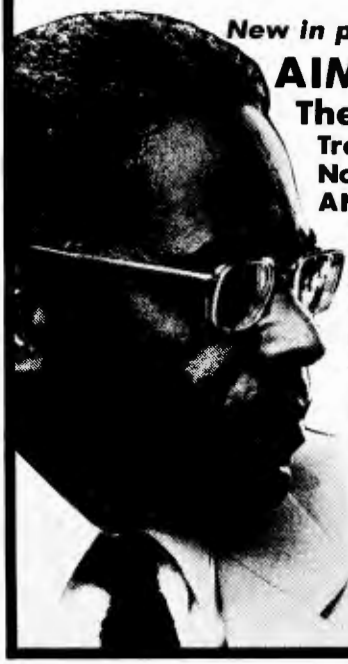

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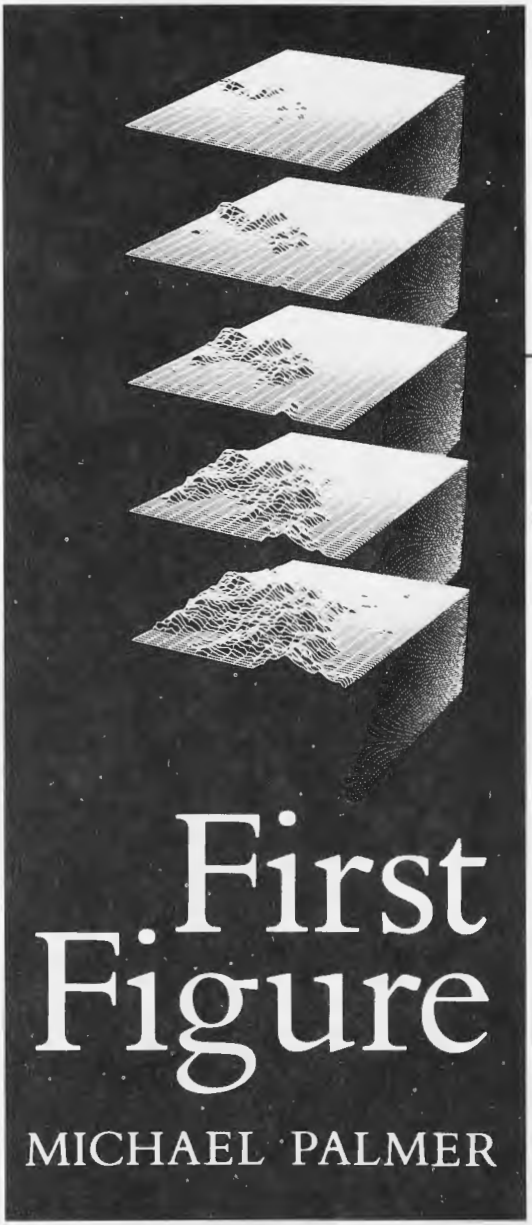

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